

HOW, THEN, SHALL I TEACH? (THE RIVIER COLLEGE MISSION COLLOQUIUM ADDRESS, OCTOBER 13, 2006)

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For some time now, I have been open and curious about the Catholic mission and identity of Rivier College. My own story of faith is still unfolding, and, in ways that strong believers in God would say are not coincidental, the many drafts of this talk have pushed me toward even greater struggle about my faith. I have yet to come back to the Catholic faith of my childhood in the best way: with all of my heart. Yet, I hope to show that this essay has moved me toward a great sense of respect for our Catholic mission and heritage. Hardly presuming expertise, I instead write as simply one of the professors here, reflective about my role at a Catholic college. My aim is to show, especially to non-Catholics, several features of a distinctly Catholic heritage with which we can ally ourselves in our lives as teachers and students. I write as someone very interested in what it is to assume a Catholic pedagogical stance, or as Ann Riggs put it in an email to me, “a Catholic spirituality of pedagogy.”

In this essay, I will ponder how my own teaching and students’ learning may connect to the following portion of our mission statement: “To participate in the life of Rivier College is... to take responsibility for ourselves and others, and to engage in dialogue about basic human issues facing society.” The central point of my talk is this: what happens in the classroom *can be* deeply informed by three fundamental features of a Catholic heritage: by a Catholic intellectual tradition of generous learning and analysis, and the critical stance associated with it; by Catholic mysticism and faith in the sacramentalism of the world around us—the belief that a power greater than ourselves—for Christians, God—can be seen, touched, and heard in the context of human living; and by the special calling Catholics feel to use their hopeful faith in a God-filled world and their powers of curiosity, openness, and critical thought, to engage the times, to fight for a just society, to take action in a suffering world.

Let me begin by posing a succinct question: Why teach here? At first, I was drawn to the social justice message I heard explicitly stated under the college name—“a Catholic liberal education for peace and social justice.” Resisting frustration at its disappearance, I have tried to be inquisitive about the other dimensions of Catholic heritage. As my years here have unfolded, I have begun to understand the complex relationship between three strands of Catholic heritage—its intellectual tradition, its mysticism, and its call for social justice. I began to understand that we engage in dialogue about basic human issues in society because, in the Catholic intellectual tradition, we are called upon to use reason, analysis, and powers of critique in the service of goodness, in the service of understanding creation and confronting injustice. I am trying to see these strands not in isolation, but instead as a fabric. Recently, what has captured my imagination the most when I think of myself as consciously opting to teach here—as committed to my life in *this* place—is Catholic mysticism, and particularly its emphasis upon sacramentalism, or the belief that all of creation is infused with divinity—a divinity working through created things, a divinity to which we can attend.

If I take that belief seriously, I have asked myself, what does it mean for me as a teacher? We can talk about being responsible for oneself and others in purely secular pedagogical terms, but what does that mission mean when seen in the context of sacramentalism, in the context of students and teachers *as*

holy—as potential recipients of *grace*? Who are students when I strive to see them this way, and how, then, shall I teach?

In August of 1999, just before my first semester teaching here at Rivier College, Tom Landy, professor of Sociology at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, came to Rivier to speak to us about opportunities for the renewal of Catholic mission and identity here at the college. I was fascinated, in particular, by the way Landy approached the Eucharist—the ritual of bread and wine incarnating God’s presence—as a deeply and particularly Catholic ritual, and how it might inform the way we live and work with each other here on campus, not only as an actual liturgical event on campus, but also as a kind of principle. For a person trained in literary study, I was all for thinking metaphorically! Where can I find the Eucharist as a principle, as a set of meanings and values, in my pedagogical world? How can we view the realities of teaching and learning as sacramental?

Tom Landy tells us that we can turn to the Eucharist for an abiding principle of mindfulness of a divine world and of one another in that world, what Landy calls "learning to pay attention," recognizing the world around us for both its plenitude and pain. Here is Landy’s encouraging view:

Jesus' use of the breaking of bread to help his disciples see suggests to me that it is holy work – a form of discipleship of a kind of minor Eucharist – to teach someone else how to pay attention. That includes teaching them to recognize some facet of the created world or to recognize injustice or to appreciate a creative act. (156)

The Eucharist is a principle that bids us to pay full human attention to our world; for our campus, a binding metaphor for intellect, heart, imagination, and action.

In addition to arguing that the actual Eucharist – part of the celebration of the Catholic Mass – should be a fundamental feature of a Catholic campus, Landy goes much further, then, encouraging us to think of the Eucharist metaphorically in our lives. He turns to the late writer Andre Dubus to explain how sacramentalism can be found in the smallest things and actions. Landy tells us that Dubus “found God all around him,” in the drive to his daughters’ school, in exercise, and in making love (156). Landy relates how Dubus, making sandwiches to bring to his daughters, “began to focus on this: that sandwiches are sacraments. Not the miracle of transubstantiation, but certainly parallel with it, moving in the same direction” (156). Landy concludes, “the sacrament that is the Eucharist makes all these other sacraments come to life. Sacraments ... make love tactile” (Landy 156).

Landy’s view of the Eucharist as a phenomenon of spiritual *attention* to everyday things excited me to think about how this principle might find a parallel in the classroom. In one of several exchanges with me, Sr. Lucille Thibodeau echoed Landy’s view this way:

... because the Incarnation has made holy everything that is good, then there are innumerable sacraments (with a small "s", if you will) around us and in us all the time. All sensible signs... are thus sacraments that mediate God to us. Christians believe that we live in a sacramental universe, on holy ground, among holy things, among holy people. We try to see the beyond in the midst of things, the ultimate in the immediate, the transcendent in the ordinary, the creator in the created, the divine in the human. Thus, and of necessity, we engage the imagination, without which we can do none of these things. We educate students to look "at" life with such academic rigor as that they can look "through" it into mystery. We educate them always to expect that there is "more here than meets the eye."

Ponder, then, this challenge: how do we translate this spiritual form of “paying attention” to the classroom? How does it happen in a seminar, in a large lecture, or in an online chat? How does it shift across disciplines in different ways—in the Bio lab, in the art studio, or in the philosophy seminar? In my own courses—always run as discussion-based seminars—I am starting to practice more attention. I notice myself noticing things: the difference between a bored face and a contemplative one; the degree to which I am doing all the talking; the way I really am not listening to a student, but instead thinking of what the last student said and what I am going to say; the degree to which there is too much talk, and not enough silent reflection and writing. I am practicing what is called “say-back” more, I hope—which is taking the time to reflect back to students what they have said. I am trying to prepare more so that I *can* attend, so that I can see the spaces within the lesson very clearly; I want to attend as much to the story of the lesson—the disciplinary discourse about literature, let us say—as to the students’ stories. Where do they meet? Where does a piece of literature, or my way of talking about it, fall on deaf ears?

Now let me apply this way of seeing the classroom to the particular strands of the mission statement.

Responsibility for Oneself

Responsibility for one’s self—this is perhaps the part of the mission that needs the most attention in my own mind—I too quickly think of the usual ways we try to foster personal responsibility in students: the way I hand them a 20 page syllabus with every expectation **bold-faced** and italicized, and then, when they falter, pompously announce, “Didn’t you read page 18, section C, of the syllabus!?”; the way I reach out to students now with speed when I see absences accruing; the way I quiz them to see if they have *really* read what has been assigned. I also think here of self-monitoring strategies, the value of meta-cognitive activities, activities that ask the learner to ponder a question such as, “what do I know or know how to do by virtue of having gone through stages and steps in the course of an assignment?” There are many techniques for promoting personal responsibility for one’s own learning, such as short reflections composed after an assignment is turned in, journals, logs, notes to the professor, etc.

But what if we are talking about this mission in a deeply Catholic way, about the way we all must respond to and *attend to* ourselves? To attend to ourselves? What is my personal responsibility, my response, to and for myself as a teacher? How do I stay tuned into myself, to my feelings and fears and hopes, how do I respond to my gift as a teacher? I say that without egotism—I am trying to find and attend to my gift. How is a higher power working through me? These are complex questions, yes? I won’t presume to have the answers here—they are lifelong questions. If I can find and stand on their answer, if I can stand on that rock, I will be able to keep above the turbulent waters of my bad days of teaching. My point is that this part of the mission applies to me too, after all, not just to students.

The particular strategies of promoting personal responsibility in the classroom relate to the Catholic heritage, to these circles of intellectual tradition, sacramentalism, and social action because each of us is part of a divine ground; to respect oneself is to honor that divinity; a humble self-awareness is a basis for intellectual curiosity and openness; and we must know ourselves and what we are called to do—we are called to act for others—so we had better have our own house in order.

Being for Others: Responsibility and Dialogue

This portion of the mission statement—to be responsible for others, and to be outward-looking, to look out at the wide world and dialogue about basic human issues (Katrina, Iraq, Darfur)—we all see how

clearly stated this part of our mission is. I think about this part of our mission in two ways: responsibility for others in the classroom and out.

I direct students to look out of the classroom, to see the connections between their general education and their preparation to engage in the world professionally and with civic competence, to write papers focused on the problems in our world, to take internships and to do service-learning, in order to experience their own effective agency in the world.

How is this call to be responsible for others, this motive toward social justice, this call to dialogue with others about basic human issues, a fundamental part of a distinctly Catholic mission? On the one hand, it can seem as though the motive to dialogue about human problems is part of *only* a social justice mission. For example, when as a teacher I care about the poor, I hear the culture at large tell me that I am a softy, a liberal, an economic ignoramus, “a nattering nabob of negativism,” as corrupt former Vice President Spiro Agnew put it. The challenge for me, in response, is to discern the linkage or overlap between the Catholic intellectual tradition, social justice, and a sacramental view of the world. We seek justice because the intellectual tradition values a passion for truth and rigorous inquiry. The Catholic intellectual tradition, as Dr. William McCoy of St. John’s University puts it, is “a 2000 year conversation [a dialogue with others] about the world, our place in it, God’s work in it, and our relationship to God.” Nathan O. Hatch, formerly the Provost of the University of Notre Dame, who also came to Rivier to speak to us about mission, puts it this way: “Catholic universities have not given up the dream of linking intellectual and moral purpose. They provide a middle ground where vital religious traditions can engage modern thought in a climate of academic freedom.”

So, to enter into complex, problem-solving dialogue is the Catholic intellectual tradition. And, we seek justice because justice is served when we honor the divinity pervading creation—social justice and a sacramental view of the universe go together.

It seems consistent to apply the same value that drives me to look outside the classroom to look inside the classroom. In the classroom, responsibility for others takes the form of some kind of response to others. How am I responsible for my students? On my best days, I try to aspire to the “dance” that Parker Palmer alludes to in his book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. He writes:

My gift as a teacher is the ability to “dance” with my students, to teach and learn with them through dialogue and interaction. When my students are willing to dance with me, the result can be a thing of beauty. When they refuse to dance, when my gift is denied, things start to become messy: I get hurt and angry, I resent the students — whom I blame for my plight — and I start treating them defensively, in ways that make the dance even less likely to happen. (52)

Palmer says, “I want to learn how to respond more gracefully to students who refuse to dance, not projecting my limitation on them but embracing it as part of myself” (52).

The mission applies to me as I try to frame my responses to students, and it applies to students themselves, responding to one another in my courses. Here I think of common forms of group work and project-based learning—the toolkit of collaboration. What features of the college’s Catholic heritage call me to take classroom time to enable students to be *present to and for one another*? To use Landy’s language, to treat each other with a kind of Eucharistic attention? For, how can we look outside the classroom in one manner, dialoguing about the problems of others in the world, and yet deny that empathic manner of relationship within the classroom itself? The teacher is one soul in a room of many souls. The exchange of oneself and one’s knowledge is a gift there for the giving—yes, for some

students, it is a poorly wrapped gift, one that shows the wear and tear of delivery, perhaps, but one that is there. I am again left with the impression that collaborative learning, and learning the breaks the wall between classroom and community, are “best practices” in education *and* soundly Catholic pedagogical stances—if we see them through all three circles of the Catholic heritage, if we *pay attention*, if we attend to how they too tap into the intellectual, spiritual, and moral roots of Catholic faith.

How, Then, Have I *Not* Been Teaching?

If the Catholic mission of the college warrants my attempt to help students use their intellectual powers and beliefs in human goodness to act justly for others, *how else*, then, should I teach? There is more here than meets the eye—what have I not been seeing? How, then, have I *not* been teaching? What should I be doing as a teacher that I have neglected? For example, how frequently, intensely, and with staying power do I teach or pay attention to:

- Active nonviolence as a positive force for social change
- The art of conflict resolution
- Critical analysis of institutions and social structures
- The different means of transforming society toward justice
- Equitable sharing of world resources
- The building of effective networks and alliances in the cause of peace?
 (“Our Values and Beliefs”)

I continue to wonder where else my life as a teacher at Rivier College might take me, if I pay attention to a world in need. I sometimes fear the unknown and new; I fear stepping out of my discipline, out of what I know, out of the bounds of my expected role, when I sense that there is more for me to attend to as a teacher in terms of teaching that links classroom and community. I feel called to teach with deep concern and connection for others in *and* outside my classroom walls. Yet, where will that take me? In the same way, I am apprehensive about what it may mean to listen *seriously and consequentially* to students, without a dismissive stance about their readiness to know and speak. Thus I think my inquiry into our mission and its connection with my teaching would be incomplete—and a bit self-contradictory, given what I have been suggesting—if I did not pay attention to my students by asking them about their perceptions of the mission. I gave my First-Year Seminar students the portion of the mission statement I have been addressing and asked them, “how would you like to see the college address these parts of the mission statement in the rest of the classes you will take at Rivier?” About our mission, my students said:

- Challenge us, see how far we can go.
- Every course in the first year should reinforce time management skills—explain *how* to be responsible.
- Connect each class lesson to something happening now.
- Reach out to community as much as we can.
- Start doing all of this now, not in senior year when we’re “ready.”
- Use media, shows, movies, and books that we’re familiar with—help us relate them to the books you want us to know.
- Start fundraisers in class.

- We all don't live a sheltered life—we know more than you think.

How else, then, could I teach, if what these students say is true? If I hear them correctly, without apprehension over their readiness to contribute, they tell me that they are already ready for our mission, ready to engage with language and knowledge, ready to *attend* to the world.

The Catholic heritage of Rivier College calls me to *pay a kind of Eucharistic attention* inside and outside my classroom to the way in which I am part of a Catholic intellectual tradition by virtue of being a faculty member here, and to how I might perceive the mystical ground of all experience and the special call to serve others. I leave it to you to decide for yourselves how to translate your attention to the Catholic mission into action: how much is enough—how much outward-looking content focused on the oppressed of the world should your course contain, if you are a faculty member? How much peer learning? In your own courses, where are these circles of Catholic heritage—intellectual tradition, sacramentalism, and social action—where are they evident, where do they overlap, and where could they be enhanced?

Eucharist is Greek for “thanksgiving,” suggesting a spirit of gratitude. I am grateful for this opportunity to *pay attention* to my teaching life, to step back from it, and to have written this essay. I am grateful for the new thinking it has given me, and for the dialogue it might spark among you.

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