

CELEBRATING CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION (CONVOCATION ADDRESS, 1996) (Originally published in *Rivier Insight*, Vol. 3, 1996)

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Rivier College, today, comes together as an academic community in recognition of the power of an idea—an idea born in the mind and heart of the Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, Ann Marie Rivier, and embodied in the work of those who established this college, nurtured its growth, and preserved its ideals. It is a powerful idea—that education and service to others—can transform both those who receive and those who give. And in this, the bicentennial year of the founding of the Congregation, this College reaffirms its commitment to these ideals of excellence in education and dedication to service for social justice.

Rivier College, with its four schools, 40 majors, 2700 students enrolled in graduate as well as undergraduate programs, and a faculty and staff exceeding 230, is a more diverse, complex institution than its founders might have imagined more than 60 years ago. As the College once focused on helping young women obtain an education that would rival the opportunities more readily available to young men, it now serves a broad range of students, each seeking very different career goals and motivated by different educational ideals. Yet despite this growth and diversity, there remains at Rivier, as the narrator of one of Virginia Woolf's novels puts it, "something central that permeates"—a conviction, rooted in faith and reason, dedicated to truth and social justice, that commits us to forming individuals of high moral character and intellectual excellence. Articulating that "something central" has not always been an easy task. During the last year and a half, the academic community at Rivier has been engaged in the process of rethinking our educational program in light of the College's historical roots and traditions, finding the point of convergence between the life of the mind and the life of the spirit, and seeking ways to embody those convictions in curricular practice. That point of convergence has never been lost sight of over the 60+ years of this College's existence. But as with all things, it is a point whose position needs to be recalculated relative to the changing needs of profession, self, and community. Today, you can buy hand-held positioning devices that will tell you your location anywhere on the planet to within a few feet. Whether you have hit a fog bank at sea or lost your way in the Maine woods, you can quickly gain your bearings by interpreting signals from fixed navigational satellites. Our task is never quite that easy, but we hope the result of our work will provide our students with something similar—an education which will function as an intellectual and moral positioning device of great sensitivity, broad range, and increasing precision. Our ultimate goal as educators, of course, is something even more effective—an education that will outfit students with their own inertial guidance system to help them maintain their life's course once they have "located" themselves within Rivier's beacons of knowledge, faith, and service.

CATHOLIC IDENTITY

Above all, we come here today to celebrate the tradition of Catholic Liberal Arts Education that Rivier is so proud to embrace. Rivier's Catholic identity is at once the most sustaining fact of our existence and, for many of us, the most difficult to articulate. That difficulty, however, is something that all of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, should prize as an inherent part of our tradition. Whether we see that

struggle historically in Aquinas' attempt to reconcile the teaching of the Church Fathers with the work of Aristotle, or in the more recent debates about the nature of liberation theology and the Church's role in the modern world, Catholicism, according to Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, editor of *Commonweal*, has always been

“a church with a brain, with a mind. ... [I]t is essential to the church, to its mission, in the world, to the lives of ordinary people that there be a vigorous and Catholic intellectual life” (ACCU Proceedings, 6).

As members of a Catholic Liberal Arts College, we are heirs to a rich intellectual tradition which prizes the pursuit of knowledge and truth, which is willing to question itself even as it investigates the world. This self-questioning rests on the belief that knowledge does not destroy faith, but enriches it. In *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II reasserted this commitment to free and independent inquiry:

a Catholic university is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God. The present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service, namely of proclaiming the meaning of truth, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice, and human dignity are extinguished. By means of a kind of universal humanism, a Catholic university is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of methods proper to each academic discipline, and so contribute to the treasury of human knowledge.

This tradition of Catholic Higher Education has little to do with fundamentalist approaches which all too often define themselves in opposition to certain types of knowledge or restrict certain modes of investigation. Instead, the Catholic liberal arts tradition, since the rise of the medieval university, has fostered the highest standards of intellectual excellence and has pursued knowledge and truth wherever they lead. Such a tradition, Steinfels emphasizes, should not be regarded as something that constrains us or impedes our development, but as an inheritance that liberates us even as it engages us:

[It] is not a browned and dried up certificate of deposit in the bank of knowledge, but a locus for questioning, a framework for ordering inquiry, a standard for preferring some sets of ideas over others. Tradition is the record of a community's conversation over time about its meaning and direction. A living tradition is a tradition that can raise questions about itself. (7)

This is the type of living tradition that we wish to nurture at Rivier—one that provides students with an approach to life, that creates a coherent “framework for ordering inquiry,” one that offers “a standard for preferring some sets of ideas over others,” and that always respects the demands of the intellect to question, probe, and challenge. Such an educational climate does not settle for easy answers or easy approaches to understanding; instead, it commits us to the more exacting enterprise, in Wallace Stevens's phrase, “to be in the difficulty of what it means to be.”

SOMETHING CENTRAL THAT PERMEATES

As a Catholic institution, however, we do differ from a secular university in this search for truth in fundamentally important ways. Perhaps more than a secular university, Catholic Institutions of Higher Education are sustained by the faith that our communal search for truth is indeed grounded in “something central that permeates”—a set of beliefs about the dignity of the human person, the majesty of creation, and the transcendent reality of a provident creator and an incarnate savior. For non-Catholics and Catholics alike, those beliefs make a difference in how we choose to live and work at Rivier. They give both immediacy and lasting value to our activity; they confer purpose on our individual actions and

hope for our joint enterprise; and they guarantee that what we pursue and create is not fragmentary and ephemeral but part of a larger design. The English poet William Blake believed that all truly creative works of the human spirit can never be lost. For Blake they build up what he came to call Golgonooza, or new Golgotha, the City of Art—a creation, which when finished, would reveal itself to be none other than the final completed form of all that we have most deeply desired and what people, through their individual contributions, have most fully imagined and enacted. In that aesthetic vision, Blake offers comfort to those who feel that the work of the intellect is lonely, isolating, doomed to revision or, worse, benign neglect. It is the analogue to the faith that underlies the Catholic intellectual tradition. Such a belief supports our vision of a communal enterprise here at Rivier—the growing and developing edifice of the intellectual and moral imagination that we foster—and recognizes the power of this idea to bind us as a community of learners and believers. Thus throughout our variety of pursuits and individual contributions the assurance of “something central that permeates” sustains and guides us.

CHALLENGES TO THIS VIEW

Today, such a belief in any underpinning continues to suffer frequent and vigorous assault. As Max Weber said at the beginning of our century,

the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. (*Science as Vocation* 155)

The power of modern intellectual inquiry has made enormous strides in the understanding of our physical and social world. But it has not always brought us what Wordsworth called “knowledge not purchased with the loss of power.” Let me provide three examples.

In the life sciences, Sociobiology has attempted to offer a completely deterministic theory of human behavior. The selfish gene has been used to explain even our most altruistic behavior as the result of evolutionary programming causing us to act solely in ways that increase the probability of our own genetic continuance. But sociobiology, while it has uncovered powerful paradigms in the mechanisms of evolution, has allowed a reductionistic methodology to result in a simplistic formulation. Sociobiology limits human beings and human behavior to the sum total of biological and evolutionary impulses, leading even one sympathetic reviewer to accuse some of these theorists of “greedy reductionism.”

In philosophy and literary theory, deconstruction has attempted nothing less than the dismantling of Western metaphysics, substituting for any kind of authority or determinate meaning an endless freefall of associations and constant deferral of final meaning. While such a methodology, too, has proved a powerful intellectual force to expose irrational hierarchies and dismantle self-perpetuating, monolithic systems of thought, it has likewise mistaken means for ends. In its rush to disenchant, it has also disenfranchised us from belief in any coherent system other than its own celebration of incoherence.

On yet another front, the increasing complexity of the silicon chip has provoked a conceptual assault on the idea of human uniqueness. As computers come closer and closer to mimicking certain human cognitive activities, the temptation has been to see all human behavior as the result of complex algorithms.

In all these areas, the intellectual and moral stakes are high. In a recent *New York Times Book Review* of philosopher and cognitive psychologist Daniel Dennett’s latest work, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, John Maynard Smith notes that someone like Dennett, who believes that the algorithms of behavior and cognition can provide a complete explanation of human behavior, must finally ask whether there is any way we can, with certainty, decide questions of morality—which actions are right and which are not. And Dennett’s answer, according the Smith, is quite stark:

There is not, unless you hold that some book, for example the Bible, is the word of God, and that human beings are here to do God's bidding. If a person is simply the product of his or her genetic makeup and environmental history, including all the ideas that he or she has assimilated, there is simply no source whence absolute morality could come. (NYRB 11/30/95)

RESPONSES TO THESE CHALLENGES

The condition that Dennett describes is one that E.M. Forster in *A Passage to India* characterizes as “a spiritual muddledom.” Of course, certainty in moral or intellectual matters is not always easy to discern, and the passage to truth may even be, as Forster describes it later in his novel, “not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable....”

But even while acknowledging this reality, as a Catholic Liberal Arts Institution we remain convinced that the sum of human knowledge will never banish a sense of mystery and awe from our lives. The world retains a source of revelation and meaning that we cannot exhaust and are foolish to deny. In Gerard Manley Hopkins' term, “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” For Hopkins, this truth is embodied in the mystery of the Incarnation. But it is a truth that gives hope and joy to non-Catholics and Catholics alike. It is a faith in the inexhaustibility of the world and a joy in the indestructibility of the soul that combats the spirit of despair. If, as Weber claims, “the fate of our times is characterized by ... the disenchantment of the world,” then one thing that a Catholic Liberal Arts Institution can do is resist this rush to disenchant and reduce, retaining its faith in the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual integrity of the human person. Though the results of sociobiology, deconstruction, and nano-technology provide extraordinary testaments to our own powers of investigation, as a Catholic Institution of Higher Education we remain committed to the truth that we are more than the sum of our genes, more than a collocation of neural pathways, more than an artfully choreographed flow of hormones, more than a product of socio-economic factors affecting psychological predispositions, more than an indeterminate meaning in search of an undeterminable author.

Someone like Dennett, denying all but material causes, cannot admit intentionality into his universe. While we may share the excitement of such research, we, as a Catholic liberal arts institution, acknowledge an intentionality that, however mysterious in its operation and difficult to discern in its manifestations, confers purpose and dignity on the human enterprise. As *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminds us:

It is essential that we be convinced of the priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primacy of the person over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter. The cause of the human person will only be served if knowledge is joined to conscience.

Thus we are enjoined to act, not out of a joyless relativism or hopeless determinism, but from a position of confirmed confidence. Through our dedication to social justice at Rivier College, we will continue to search for the truth, not just the utility, of our moral decisions, based on transcendent principles, not just societal consensus. Where others deny their ability to judge, we are called to speak out. As Rivier rededicates itself to explore issues of social justice, we will need to proceed cautiously in our attempt to distinguish what is truly essential and right from our own cultural prejudices and individual presumptions. We must never let self-righteousness blind us to the difficulties of discerning true righteousness; and we must never let self-assurance pass for moral certainty. The answers will require a great deal of discussion; and that discussion will be difficult at times. We will need humility,

thoughtfulness, and prayer. But we continue in the knowledge that the attempt is not fruitless and the difficulty of the enterprise is part of our responsibility within the Catholic liberal arts tradition.

ETHOS AND LEARNING

The attempt to separate the technical from the ethical, intellect from morality, knowledge from character has been one of the peculiar distinctions of the modern secular university. Yet, as Mark Schwehn in his book *Exiles from Eden* notes, the attempt is both misguided and ultimately self-defeating. As he points out, we cannot be considered thoughtful, in the full sense of the term, without being both reflective about important matters and considerate of others—the very term, “thoughtful,” suggests this integration of intellect and character that we expect from an educated person. Likewise, a “thoughtless” person is one who is not only unreflective but inconsiderate. At Rivier, we recognize this intrinsic connection and attempt to bring intellect and character into conjunction—knowledge that guides decisions and issues in action. Hopkins expresses this most acutely. The just person, he says “justices.” That is how the individual comes to understand the deepest “integrity” of the soul—through action that expresses who we are.

Thus in reaffirming its commitment to learning through service to others, for the ends of social justice, Rivier College attempts to help students put their knowledge into practice, to turn substantives into verbs. But a liberal arts education acknowledges that the task begins with the individual and the need to promote individual excellence. As Dr. Stephen Trainor, Dean of the School for Undergraduate Studies has put it:

The response of the liberal arts college . . . is, as it has always been, to focus on personal perfection as a means of transforming society, not perfection in the delusionary sense of producing a race of flawless human beings, but rather in the sense of each person achieving for themselves wholeness and completeness, the full development of all their powers.

As a liberal arts institution, we celebrate the tradition of *integritas*, the development of wholeness which is the goal of our curriculum. It stands behind our desire to educate the “whole person” and our attempts to foster dialogue within the curriculum itself. Such an education, as Dr. Trainor has reminded us, is

moral, unitive, lifelong, and useful. . . . [It] seeks to counterbalance [the trend toward fragmentation in our society and modern life] by making integration of knowledge - the ability to see ideas in relation and to make meaning out of experience - its principal and characteristic method of thought.

Thus the liberal arts institution has always asserted that breadth must accompany depth of specialization, that the true goal of such an education is to develop that ability, as Wordsworth put it, “to see the parts as parts, but with a feeling for the whole.”

I want to end by suggesting three principles to guide us in our continuing discussion of a liberal arts education here at Rivier. I take these injunctions from poet Wallace Stevens, and although they are used by Stevens to much different purposes, I think they can provide a useful framework for discussion. These three principles are simple: “it must be abstract,” “it must change,” “it must give pleasure.”

It Must Be Abstract

The first—“it must be abstract” is perhaps the most difficult because of our society’s view of education in largely pragmatic terms. But the word “abstract” does not necessarily imply something that is “irrelevant,” “vague,” “cold-blooded” “impersonal,” or “remote.” Instead, it more correctly describes the

potential power that ideas have when they have not yet been delegated to serve a particular ideology or limited application. A Liberal Arts Education is less a designer molecule carefully constructed, atom by atom, to perform a specific chemical task, than a supersaturated solution ready to precipitate once a seed crystal is introduced. It is the power of the potential of the mind rather than its limited utility. By celebrating the abstract, we celebrate the freedom and power of ideas within our curriculum—the ideas of a Piaget, a Marie Curie, a Martin Luther King, a Charles Darwin, a William Blake, a Max Planck, an Immanuel Kant, a Dorothy Day, a Mary Wollstonecraft, a Rollo May, a Plato, a Virginia Woolf, — to change the ways in which we view our world and make clearer the path to truth and justice. A liberal arts education must be abstract, not so that it is made useless but so that it can become more useful. This does not mean that a liberal arts education should not prepare students for professions and that it should not embrace developing high levels of skills and mastery of specifics. On the contrary, professionalism is one of our most important goals here at Rivier—providing individuals with the knowledge and training to perform to exacting standards whether as health care professionals, accountants, educators, graphic designers, paralegals, social workers, managers, reporters, counselors, research lab assistants, or self-employed consultants. But underlying that training and preparation, through the breadth and depth of the liberal arts core and throughout our major programs, is that desire to impart “something central that permeates.” A liberal arts education always attempts to provide something that is more, not less, than the sum of its parts.

It Must Change

The second injunction—it must change—reminds us that a Liberal Arts Education must respond to the changing needs of its students and the changing world they find themselves in. We should not be satisfied with past formulations or our present curricular packaging unless they meet our current scrutiny. Just as we must be willing to pursue knowledge wherever it leads, so too we must be willing to challenge our educational practices and structures to make sure we have adapted the best of the past to the demands of the present. A commitment to change is not a prescription for wholesale abandonment of our strengths and our convictions. Instead, it acknowledges that education is influenced by changing technologies, changing paradigms, and, above all, changes in students. While we remain committed to the “something central that permeates” our identity as a Catholic Liberal Arts institution, we need to explore the ways by which we can better structure learning for our students and so help them recognize the central role of knowledge and values in their lives.

It Must Give Pleasure

And finally, it must give pleasure. What we are about is not some grim business of inculcating facts and theories, of testing and correcting, but an enterprise that should be a truly liberating experience—perhaps one of the most overlooked meanings of “liberal” in this context. Just as we have a semiotics of reading, so we need an erotics of learning—a way of making the intellectual task, even though it is hard, and sometimes painful, work, ultimately a joyful experience. This does not mean superficial changes in courses or curriculum to make them easier or merely “fun.” A true educational setting is one that makes solving problems, exploring issues, designing solutions, debating implications, seeing relationships, articulating meaning—difficult as those activities might be—joyful activities because they engage the full play of human intellect working, in community, to understand the world we have inherited.

CONCLUSION

In her *Ode for the Bicentennial Celebration*, Sr. Lucille Thibodeau has reminded us of the fact that

It is no good time, as no good time it always seems,
to make another bold beginning from this end . . .

And yet, it is precisely because no time is ever a good time that today is the right time for us to build on our legacy and begin again. As we come together to celebrate and reaffirm the values that have made us what we are as an institution, let us dedicate ourselves to the task of defining ever more clearly what we should be so that, as the poem tells us, “the task shall have once more begun.” We are all part of a great undertaking at Rivier College — and we should all undertake to play a great part. ■

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