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Social Justice and Life-Long Integration: The Business of the University

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Eleven years ago, I was finishing a dissertation at Saint Louis University, and I was looking for a job. I interviewed at ten different Catholic educational institutions – which made my dissertation defense seem easy. The experience forced me to reflect and articulate what I am about. To the question, “Why are you attracted to educational ministry?” (worded differently, but present in every interview), I responded, “I feel called to journey with people on the road to finding meaning,” (also worded differently in each interview). To the question, “Why are you applying for a campus ministry position with a Ph.D.?” I responded, “I want to integrate my academic interests with ministry.” I was very fortunate; I was offered the job I most wanted. In 1996, I began at Loyola University Chicago as a lay chaplain, including chaplain to the School of Education (my academic background). While difficult to articulate in an interview, my desire for the integration of meaning and identity is not uncommon.

Above all, university students and faculty seek meaning, or the integration of abstract truths with the individual’s identity,
which is then integrated into the lived experience of the person. University structures, departments and organizations often fail to pursue meaning – not intentionally because of an aversion to meaning – but as a result of the fierce competition for time and resources. However, when integrated with the business of a university, learning – the pursuit of meaning – does not compete with other agendas, but actually enhances them.

Meaning is inseparable from social justice. In many faith-based or philosophical worldviews, human dignity is an inherent and essential characteristic. Human dignity demands treating human beings justly. When this truth is integrated with the identity of learners (both students and faculty) and integrated with their lived experience, the resultant meaning-full person is an advocate and activist for social justice.

However, in universities, social justice is too often relegated to the fringe. Social justice cannot be pushed to the fringe. Social justice is everyone’s business and should be acted upon through all activity and academic pursuits. Social justice begins with how we treat each other in everyday life, moves through how and what we study and ends in life-long learning that is inseparable from the pursuit of meaning. Viewed in this way, social justice is not just an added-on commitment or classroom lesson. Rather, social justice is an outgrowth of the rich learning that comes from finding meaning. If the university does its job, it will produce individuals and communities committed to life-long learning and meaning-full advocacy for social justice.

GOD CREATED HUMAN BEINGS IN GOD’S IMAGE.

IN THE DIVINE IMAGE, GOD CREATED THEM.

GENESIS 1:27

People in schools of education have some unique habits. For one thing, they use the word “vocation” a lot, but in a special way. The word is not used in the traditional sense, meaning “occupation.” The word is not used in the old, Catholic sense of
God calling an individual to poverty, obedience and chastity (even though at points in history, this became the teacher lifestyle). The word is not used in the “vocational school” sense, meaning the teaching of skills solely for use in a particular trade. The meaning is somewhere in between.

People in schools of education know they need to hone certain skills for their future work, and they take this development very seriously. The university classroom is not enough; those studying to be teachers must engage in a formal mentorship, in the real world of teaching, before they obtain a license. Students in schools of education know that what they are preparing to do has great importance. Teaching is a service that goes beyond those directly served; by educating a group of young people, teachers serve not only their students but society as a whole. Teachers are, in a very real sense, building society. The passive-voice “to be called” aspect of “vocation” is the meaning that students in schools of education assign to the word when they use “vocation” in reference to their future work. The sense of a calling to teach extends to those working in higher education. There is a seriousness to the whole business of learning that makes most in education look at pure pursuits of material things as less important. Instead, educators pursue meaning.

I have an operational definition of “meaning.” Meaning is the individual’s discovery of abstract truths that both explain the physical world and place the discoverer in the world. Meaning binds the discoverer to both the physical world and to the abstract. I approach this from the perspective of a Catholic lay minister who deals with some big abstract truths that cannot be proven (apologies to Aquinas) and can barely be demonstrated. However, I would say that this operational definition also works for even the everyday, common discoveries. The child who memorizes that red and blue make purple has not achieved meaning. The child who discovers that this formula applies to the real world through dying Easter eggs has. Not only is the child more connected to the physical world (acting as an agent
in creating red, blue and all shades of purple eggs), but the child is more connected to the formula because the child now believes in the formula. I think this is the attraction of the university for students, staff and faculty; they come to the university seeking to make sense of their world and seeking something in which they can believe. Meaning discovery is the business of the university.

The university has a constant vibrancy: potential. No matter how old I become and how many times I run a program, every August presents eager, fresh faces. No matter how much empirical research I conduct, there is always more I can learn. Despite the images of timeless traditions that universities like to use (who else dresses up in Medieval costumes once a year?), universities are always more about becoming than about having been. I believe that what drives the journey is the pursuit of meaning.

**IF I HAVE THE GIFT OF PROPHECY AND COMPREHEND ALL MYSTERIES AND KNOWLEDGE; IF I HAVE FAITH TO MOVE MOUNTAINS, BUT I DO NOT HAVE LOVE, I AM NOTHING.**

*FIRST CORINTHIANS 13:2*

Unfortunately, universities place little effort into helping students discover meaning. We (students, staff and faculty) know that meaning is something that seems like a lofty dream in daily university life. We get bogged down with measurable objectives (which are important!). Students have to pass exams that demonstrate useable knowledge and skills. Universities have to meet standards for accreditations and professional organizations. Bills have to be paid. Budgets need to be justified. Rankings need to be earned. Even in campus ministry, evaluations and head counts can become dominant. How many were at Mass? How much did the retreat or program cost? How many
served in volunteer activities and for how many hours? How did the evaluation forms for the service trip turn out?

The problem lies in a desire to assure quality and the limits of our ability to demonstrate that. The university and all its members need to demonstrate that we have achieved something. The problem is that as the measurable becomes the focus, the immeasurable gets lost. Those things we hope most to achieve in education take a back seat to those things we can measure and demonstrate. We can measure whether a student can recall principles of ethics on an exam, but we cannot demonstrate whether the student will actually use those principles in the real world. We cannot tell whether the student will be bound to the abstract principle in practice. We can measure how many students participate in university organizations, but we cannot measure how deeply this affects students or yields meaningful relationships, networks or real-world learning. We can count how many people chose to receive ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday, but we cannot describe the sense of ongoing conversion in their lives.

As an instructor of Research Methodology at Loyola, I do not propose that we dump formal evaluation. I do think we in the university need to remember that formal evaluation is only the end of a project, the tail. Ideally the dog wags the tail, not the other way around. While we must keep in mind the measurable aspects of the business of learning, we cannot let those measurable aspects dictate our immeasurable pursuit of meaning. While tests and papers are important, I believe the key to true learning is in integrating meaning discovery with all aspects of our business as a university. How do we go about this?

A year after I started at Loyola, I began teaching as a part-time faculty member in the School of Education. I was teaching a research methodology class and I relied heavily on the work of
my recent Saint Louis University mentor, Michael Grady.1 His approach in designing research begins with a discussion of the values that were embedded in the project.2 My students used his model and reported back that they felt they created much better research designs using this starting point.

Around the same time, I also became involved in "alternative break immersion" experiences. Over spring break, students visit another community and engage in service work. I had had a couple of adventures with these trips in my ministry experience before coming to Loyola, but it was at Loyola that I was first exposed to a philosophy integrating service and faith through reflection. Integrating service and faith truly came together for me in 1998 when I began leading immersion trips to Cuba for graduate students. The students helped with English programs in Cuba and also wrote field papers for the Qualitative Research Methodology class I was teaching. Students reported that the assignments made them look at the Cuban culture and forced them to go deeper and to learn more than if they had only been doing service. This integration of academics and service enhanced the experience of both.

The students had to reflect on their own values, sometimes discovering new values or values they did not previously know they had. They could see values played out in the world, in their lives and in the lives of the poor. They were forced to question values (their own and those of others), test them and decide if they wanted to own them - if they wanted to believe them. I developed a model for this kind of learning out of experiences. I titled the model the "Cognitive-Experiential Tri-Circle."3

1 Michael Grady, Ph.D, Professor of Educational Studies, St. Louis University, http://www.slu.edu/x13830.xml (last visited Feb. 10, 2008).
3 Just Readings: A Loyola University Chicago On-Line Social Justice Reader 28-30 (Michael J. Maher & Daniel Hartnett eds., 2004) available at www.luc.edu/missionandministry/PDFS/justreadings.pdf. See also Michael J. Maher, Individual Beliefs and Cultural Immersion in Service-
The purpose of the model is to describe the learning process, which I believe is at the heart of the academic service-learning program and can be integrated into various learning environments. In the model, the circles are equally distant. They may pull closer together or push farther apart, but two cannot move in relationship to each other without affecting the third. If the self (student) goes more deeply into the experience, he or she will become more in tune with his or her own beliefs. If he or she reflects and becomes more in tune with his or her own beliefs, he or she will be drawn more deeply into the experience. If the experience and his or her own beliefs interact closely, the student will be drawn more deeply into both, or all circles.

The reverse is also possible. A surface-level depth of the experience will yield only surface-level reflection on beliefs, and surface-level reflection on beliefs will yield only surface-level depth into the experience. The thrust of the method is to continually connect the three elements of self, experience and beliefs. Discussion and observation of the sites is not to be done without reflection on values and beliefs.


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As a teacher of research methods, I challenged myself to test the model. I interviewed students after immersions designed from this model. Feedback was clear: they learned more, and they saw applications of their learning to situations in their professional and personal lives. The model and the experience were meaningful for them. I put out this model not as the key to higher education, but as an example that the search for meaning does not compete with the skills and information we must provide. In fact, by integrating meaning discovery with learning, as educators, we enhance the business of the university.

At the heart of the pursuit of meaning is the question, “Who am I?” As each individual works to answer this, another question is inevitably intertwined, “Who are those around me?” All the major worldviews of the human person, religious and secular, have human dignity at the core. The concept of human dignity leads to a respect for the individual’s freedom and rights. A deep belief in the human dignity of each individual necessarily leads to a deep commitment to social justice. University ministries are so involved in social justice causes because they are essential meaning points that integrate self, world and faith. Social justice is where belief engages the learner in the world. It is one of the key places where meaning is made. When truths about what it means to be human are integrated within the iden-

tity of the learner (both students and faculty) and integrated with lived experience, the meaning-full person cannot help but become an advocate and activist for social justice who works to protect every person’s freedom and rights.

**THIS IS THE FASTING THAT I WISH:**

RELEASE THOSE BOUND UNJUSTLY,
UNTIE THE THONGS OF THE YOKE,
SET FREE THE OPPRESSED AND BREAK EVERY YOKE; SHARE YOUR BREAD WITH THE HUNGRY, SHELTER THE HOMELESS AND OPPRESSED, CLOTHE THE NAKED.

**ISAIAH 58:6–7**

A lived and integrated commitment to social justice becomes an essential thread in the fabric of community and allows the individual to understand himself or herself. This guides the individual’s interaction with others and as well as the individual’s understanding of himself or herself in community. A lived and integrated commitment to social justice plays out in the day-to-day interactions with family, with friends, with loved ones, with professors, with students, with workers, with employers. Indeed, I think no greater charge can be made against a university than to accuse it of talking about justice but at the same time failing to act justly towards its own students, employees and neighbors. Such a charge goes to the heart of meaning; it accuses the university of being meaningless.

Despite the strength and truth of this charge, too often social justice is relegated to the fringe in the university. This can mean that social justice-oriented academic programs serve only a minority of the university community and receive a minority of resources, or, this can mean that a fringe population is left to do the university’s social justice – though the population is mostly noted for its many posters and an argumentative stance. The common association of social justice with unending anger is one factor that influences many to turn away from the ideals of so-
cial justice and keeps such causes at the fringe of society. Too often, some of those who are committed to causes and to the academic programs focused on social justice issues seem to prefer the fringe rather than bring their ideas into the mainstream. Such an expression is not truly integrated and meaningful. Meaningful commitment to social justice is meaningful commitment to human life and dignity. Though the person committed to social justice may be fervent, the commitment gives pleasure and happiness – not despair and anger. While the university must be committed to moving the apathetic toward meaning and a commitment to social justice, the university must also be dedicated to moving those committed to causes toward an integrated life that yields meaning and joy, not despair and anger.

When meaning is an integrated function of the business of the university, social justice, as a function of meaning, is not on the fringe. Social justice is everyone's business acted out through all activities and academic pursuits. Social justice begins with how we treat each other on a daily basis and moves through how and what we study. Social justice ends in a life-long learning that is guided by the pursuit of meaning. Social justice is not an added commitment that brings with it anger and guilt. Rather, social justice is an outgrowth of the rich learning that comes from finding meaning. This is not only true of the individuals within the university; it is also true of the university itself.

THEN I SAW A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH. THE FORMER HEAVEN AND THE FORMER EARTH HAD PASSED AWAY. I ALSO SAW THE HOLY CITY, A NEW JERUSALEM, COMING DOWN OUT OF HEAVEN FROM GOD. I HEARD A LOUD VOICE FROM THE THRONE SAYING, "BEHOLD, GOD'S DWELLING IS WITH THE HUMAN RACE."

REVELATIONS 21:1-3

A familiar scene: a group of young adults assembles, listens to a scholar present ideas, engages in discussion about those ideas,
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goes off to research, expands those ideas and applies them to questions of interest. The familiar scene is a university, a common scene not only today, but has been for thousands of years.\(^5\) The university is an experience shared by virtually every physician, teacher, lawyer, business manager, reporter, politician, social worker, clergy member and most likely every reader of this article, worldwide. The computer I use to compose this article was designed by someone who attended a university, and most likely the designer of the software is also the product of some university. The keyboard, the mouse, the desk holding the computer and even the chair in which I sit were all probably designed by university graduates. The designer of the pen I used for jotting some notes and the people who figured out how to market all those things so that my employer would buy them for me also probably attended a university.

We should be mindful, however, of those who did not attend a university. Most likely, the people who assembled the computer, who built the chair and desk, who produced the pen, who drove the trucks and piloted the ships that delivered them here, did not attend a university. In fact, only about one percent of

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humans on this planet have a university degree. The familiar university scene is perhaps not so familiar to many after all.

Like all these designers, the university itself does not actually make anything, but universities do make things happen. Universities do not produce knowledge; universities transform knowledgeable people – people who are the cornerstones of communities. The experience of being at a university is a privilege few enjoy. Life after the university is also a privilege. Most often, this is the privilege of not having to make anything, but of making things happen. This is the privilege of having a consciousness and frameworks into which we can fit the events around us, everything from the world stage to our inner thoughts. This is a life that is formed to make meaning; this is a life transformed. Those of us who spend our lives at universities are possibly the most privileged of all.

I am pointing all this out because of the enormous responsibility it places on the university community. Truly, all other similar institutions of transformation are dependant on universities: law, education, politics, business, religion and social service. None of these would exist today without universities.

Looking at the last century, and at the current state of the world, how does the university rate in performance? What is the world we have produced? Have our great ideas made a better world filled with justice? We can point fingers at the roots of injustice in the same manner that certain politicians, business leaders, terrorists, educators and clerics point fingers, but who had all these “bad guys” in class at some point? Who had the chance to form and transform them and failed? Who had the chance, but did not show them that a meaningful life is a life of justice? When the world fails to be just, we, the collective university community, have failed the world.

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To bring about a just world, universities must place justice at the center. This does not mean neglecting all the professional and technical training universities provide. In fact, it means taking on as much of this as is possible and enriching it with true human meaning. The scope of the university must expand, as must its commitment to integrating justice into its every aspect. If it does not, the university is not completing its only and most important work: producing individuals and communities committed to life-long learning and meaning-full advocacy for social justice.