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LINDSEY LEONARD

Down and Out: First Year Students Encounter Lutheran Theology

They arrived as they always do: high on independence, terrified of freedom, looking for a place to belong. They carried with them bins, and bags, and boxes full of stuff (so much stuff!) labeled carefully, dutifully, with their name and hall assignment. A printed orientation schedule and a stack of forms tucked neatly in a folder lay on their dashboard. The lanyard around their neck held a college student ID, the ultimate signal of first year status.

They also arrived with cautious eyes above masked noses (for those who didn't need correcting). They carried with them six months of disappointment and heartache; with it, almost unbearable amounts of anticipatory grief. Some didn't bother bringing winter clothing, sure we'd be sending them home before the temperatures ever dropped. Others didn't bother coming at all. The heightened sense of uncertainty created a haze of reluctance; better not get too close, too comfortable, or too confident—knowing all too well how quickly this can all be taken away.

Fall of 2020 required all of us—staff, faculty, students—to reach deep into our (nearly depleted) reservoirs of perseverance. We resumed mitigated life on a college campus in ways that on the surface felt familiar but were often unfulfilling. The triage we found in the Spring was continuing, and some of the greatest concern was felt, specifically, for the first-year students. What a time to move into college, to be met with such a monumental transition during an international health crisis, to be asked to

take on another challenge in an already challenging time.

At Wartburg College, all first-year students are enrolled in a first-year seminar course, called Inquiry Studies or IS 101. In addition to being the cornerstone for the first-year transition, IS 101 seeks to welcome students into an academic community by introducing the value of a liberal education. Curated by the IS 101 teaching team, students interact with an anthology of essays, book chapters, manuscripts, and poems throughout the course. This IS 101 Reader is organized using the college's mission pillars: leadership, service, faith, and learning.

Effective first year seminars center opportunities for active involvement, social integration, personal reflection, personal meaning, and personal validation (Cuseo). Done well, students are met with content and pedagogy that upholds these five learning processes. Recognizing that the circumstances of the world and the environment in which these students were beginning college, and valuing Cuseo's research, we made two additions to the IS 101 Reader just before it was published for the Fall 2020 cohort. The first, a piece written by the Dalai Lama titled, "Prayer is Not Enough," which ran in the *New York*



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Times. The second, a reflection and story penned by Paul Kingsnorth titled *Finnegas*.

Through readings and discussion about the coronavirus pandemic, using these two additional works as a backdrop, first year students heard the call for a unified response toward a global crisis. Many could express deep commitment to wearing a mask, following campus policy aimed to mitigate the spread, and holding their community accountable so that everyone could be safe. Even with a student body comprised almost entirely of traditional students (age 18-22), class discussion about remaining vigilant in the fierce protection of those most vulnerable were prevalent; these are not times to be selfish. No matter how uncomfortable, inconvenient, or unwanted this exercise in compassion is, the call to consider and serve the neighbor was a sentiment much discussed and well honored. Consideration and service to the neighbor—a theme had surfaced that would transcend the current topic.

As part of a new community, often more diverse than the homes from which they came, first year students were invited to consider and reflect on stereotypes by reading the transcript of Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie's TedTalk *Danger of a Single Story*. They were also participants in a workshop on microaggressions (what they are, how they happen, what to do when one occurs). Through this IS 101 content, students were called to consider their privileges (everyone has privilege!) and reflect on ways that those identities hold unearned yet clearly given power in our society. Students quickly understood that there is another pandemic plaguing America, and this pandemic wasn't a new one; black people have been fighting the effects of slavery and racism and bigotry for years.

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These conversations around racial injustices in our nation are challenging, especially when done in a students' first term. Yet we must be bold in commitment to be a part of the work of antiracism—work that starts in the head,

takes roots in the heart, and serves through the hands. In considering the stereotypes of which they held, students begin to understand their own biases and learn to interrupt their thinking—work of the head. By acknowledging their privilege, they see themselves as both part of the problem and part of the solution—work of the heart. At our predominantly white institution, many of our students have been able to separate themselves from the direct effects of racism. Now, though, they are offered the tools to no longer be complicit in systems that uphold discrimination and white supremacy. Antiracism is work of the hands, and another example for what it means to serve the neighbor.

"Antiracism is work of the hands, and another example for what it means to serve the neighbor."

Every year, a common read is selected campus wide as an opportunity to increase engagement through shared experiences. This year, we selected *Climate Justice* by Mary Robinson. After learning about what climate change is, what contributes to global warming, and what can be done to slow the effects, students discussed Robinson's work, which engages the reader in stories from across the world to illustrate how those who contribute to climate change least are affected by it the most. Students considered how closely climate change reform is connected to policy, how policy is connected to people with power, and how people with power often only have a sliver of narrative for how others live (clear connections here with Adichie's piece). Students reflect on how, beyond the devastating Iowa derecho and some hotter hot days and other colder cold days, their daily lives may be free from the deep pressure to change habits that can clearly impact climate change. However, the truth is clear that communities, tribes, families, and lives depend on a swift and coordinated world-wide effort by all global citizens to prioritize practices that lead to reduced emissions; we *all* must be committed to doing the work so *all* may flourish. Climate justice, too, is care of neighbor.

Each fall, our campus pastor accepts the invitation to speak to the first-year cohort about what it means to

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be attending a Lutheran institution. Students learn that there was a time that Lutheran institutions were only for Lutheran students and sought to produce Lutheran pastors. However, that is no longer the vocation of Wartburg College (but it is okay if they decide to be Lutheran in the end). Pastor describes that the Lutheran heritage informs a belief that everyone, every student, has a vocation, a calling, a purpose. Because Lutheran theology is rooted in *sola fide* (faith alone), the way to honor God is to live out our commitment through our vocation. Because God’s love and grace comes all the way down to us, we are freed up to go out and serve our neighbor.

By recognizing and taking seriously the injustices of climate change, in no longer being complicit in racism, in masking and distancing to protect those with the most weakened immune system, students were interfacing with Lutheran theology, which directly calls us to serve our neighbor. In embracing this theme, we were all reminded that Jesus’ gift freely given liberates us from reaching for God in attempts to achieve salvation; instead, the Spirit has come all the way down to us, and this “frees us to love

our neighbor and promote the common good” (ELCA). Now, more than ever, we are called to be part of a global response to every pandemic rooted in the “down and out”.

They arrived as they always do. Unsure of the purpose of IS 101, eyes rolling with the consideration of liberal learning as having immense value, weary of what it means to be attending a Lutheran institution. They began to read, think, and write about the many pandemics—not just the most obvious health crisis, but also the pandemics of racism and climate change. They came to see that they are “called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish” (NECU). For our first-year students, the “COVID class”, as well as liberal, Lutheran education as a whole, teaches service, citizenship, connectedness, and compassion. That education has never been more applicable, or more valuable, or more transformative.

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