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FALL 2021

Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education



IN THIS ISSUE

Called to Place

Intersections is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-seven institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. It is published by the NECU, and has its home in the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, the institutional sponsor of the publication. **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives.

About the Cover and Artists

Be Nourished

Mosaic by Patrick and Luisa Hansel, and members of the St. Olaf College community

The mosaic pictured on the cover hangs on a wall in the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. It was created at the time of the Center's launch by two Lutheran pastors, Patrick and Luisa Hansel, who served a mostly immigrant church in Minneapolis until their recent retirement. Several dozen members of the St. Olaf community participated in putting pieces of the mosaic together. Deanna Thompson, Director of the Center and Martin E. Marty Regents Chair in Religion and the Academy at St. Olaf, describes the art as "capturing the sense of what it means to be nourished to do the work that matters most in this world. The people in the mosaic come from different religious and cultural backgrounds and gather around a table where they are nourished by food and drink. They are nourished by the rich natural world that surrounds them and by their connections to one another. The mosaic provides a vision of what nourishment for the work ahead might look like" (from her essay in *Intersections*, Fall 2020).

Intersections

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From the Editor



The theme of the 2021 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education conference, hosted by Augsburg University, was “Called to Place: Community-Responsive Education.” Presentations and conversations over four days took stock of the importance of particular settings, including the physical and cultural geog-

raphies of campuses and the surrounding communities, for the deep learning of our students, and for us as educators. Participants considered how local landscapes and neighborhoods shape the missions, identities, and institutional callings of our schools, along with the individual vocations of those so emplaced, including our central callings to become anti-racist as we work toward the belonging of all.

In my opening address, I emphasized the importance of the everyday, quite literal sense of “place” and “neighbor” and “neighborhood.” In a world that is *digitally* interconnected *virtually* everywhere, but where our students and sometimes we ourselves increasingly feel rootless, alienated, without a sense of home and real belonging—indeed, in a world where an increasing number of our students grieve the loss of home, either because they have migrated (by choice or by force) from other places, or have been displaced and marginalized through racial and economic powers—we need to think creatively about how actual physical geographies and the particular, embodied people inhabiting them are essential to

understanding oneself and one’s meaning and purpose and place in the world.

The foundational NECU document, *Rooted and Open*, describes the “common calling” of our network of 27 Lutheran colleges and universities. Despite this shared work, the document notes that each school also has its own *particular* intuitional calling, which responds to its *particular* location. It claims that “Lutheran higher education calls students beyond the rewards of upward mobility and financial security so that their lives will also be attentive to people who need them most *and places that call out for healing*” (6). More centrally, *Rooted and Open* makes the bold claim that our students are “called and empowered—to serve the neighbor—so that all may flourish.”

“We need to think creatively about how actual physical geographies and the particular, embodied people inhabiting them are essential to understanding oneself and one’s meaning and purpose and place in the world.”

Of course, this attention to vocation or calling is not absolutely unique to Lutheran higher education. Beyond NECU you have NetVUE, the Network of Vocation in Undergraduate Education, a looser consortium of almost 300 schools that

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also identifies education-for-vocation as of central importance to independent, especially church-related, colleges and universities.

But what *is* distinctive, if not unique, is *what* Lutheran schools emphasize when they educate for vocation, *how* they do so in particular ways, and *why* particular geographical and cultural landscapes here matter. Let me try to explain.

In some more secular contexts, vocation is likened to the meanings, purposes, and passions of individuals. It's said that, when one finds one's true calling, a job will become work that one would do for free. Careers become callings when they tap into individual's deepest commitments and draw forth their deepest passions.

This emphasis on the individual's passions and feeling of purposefulness is frequently (and rightfully) tempered by colleges and universities that value their religious-affiliations—whether Lutheran, Jesuit, Presbyterian, Jewish, or something else. According to them, an individual's sense of her capabilities and interests, her gifts and passions, take the form of callings when and only when they become responsive to the needs of others. In the words of Frederick Buechner, vocation is where your own deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. Without becoming responsive to what the world needs of you, you might have ample ambition and career opportunities, but you do not yet have a calling.

Lutheran higher education, at best, goes one step further. It is aware of all the ways that "the world's hunger" or "the needs of the world" can also become abstract and vacuous—at best ciphers for, and at worst ideological justifications of, what turns out to be individual ambition after all. For example, if I'm gifted in developing flavors of e-cigarettes that appeal to minors, I am probably able to justify the "need" for that work insofar as it grows an industry, creates jobs, maybe even respects the decision-making capabilities of 13 year-old "consumers."

We can see here how "the world's need" can mean just about anything whenever people wants to justify their ambition by calling it a vocation. Even more abstract and vacuous than "need" are appeals to "the world." Indeed, in a late-industrial capitalist economy driven by consumer spending, "the world" can become almost synonymous with "the Market" (another abstraction—and one often deified).

If we are to guard against such abstractions and self-justifications, we must understand "the world's need" in particular ways. It is never simply the theoretical need of an abstract world. Rather, it must be what, for example, particular small business owners in a particular Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis need from Augsburg University as an anchor institution. Or (in my own context), what particular Spanish-speaking tutoring programs in the Florencia neighborhood need from Augustana students and educators. Or what the Driftless landscape of Northeast Iowa and the town of Decorah needs from Luther's College's initiatives in renewable energy.

"'What' and 'who' questions also depend on questions of place: Where are you? Where do you come from?"

Many if not most students at NECU institutions are by now familiar with the idea of vocation or of being called to purposeful work in the world. They learn that the question, "What are you going to do?" is preceded by the question "Who are you?" or, "What is your story?" What I am trying to suggest here is that "what" and "who" questions also depend on questions of place: *Where* are you? *Where* do you come from? Which particular communities sustain you and how do you become grateful and responsive to them? *Where*—quite literally—are you heading? In other words, in order to discern both personal identity and the purposeful work to which one is called, students and those who teach them need a sense of the places and peoples that serve and are served by them. In the words of Wallace Stegner, "If you don't know *where* you are, you don't know *who* you are."

There are at least 27 different ways that NECU institutions are at work engaging surrounding places and communities and otherwise educating our students for a sense of rootedness and belonging. This issue of *Intersections* showcases some powerful examples, which I commend to you and others in your place.

Where Your Feet are Standing: Institutional Engagement and Place



Years ago, I traveled with Cal Lutheran students on a Service Learning trip to El Salvador. Our posture was one of being attentive and reflective learners. Leaders taught us about economic forces that impacted their communities in negative ways. We witnessed music, education, and arts

fueling the healing of a city. We heard people describe social justice ventures which broke apart systems that did not enhance human flourishing. Our leader, Pastor Kim, shared these words: “Your theology depends on where your feet are standing.” He may not have been the first person to speak these words, yet they cracked open my ears and the imagination of my heart.

Your theology depends on where your feet are standing.

Cal Lutheran stands tall as the youngest of the colleges and universities of the ELCA perched within the Conejo Valley of southeastern Ventura County. We are located halfway between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. Birds who take refuge in the landscape of Kingsmen Park and find water to drink in the two creeks on campus can swiftly fly to the Pacific Ocean 12 miles away. For humans in cars or bicycles, it is a journey of about 25 miles.

Every family has a story, one that they tell with a sense of honesty or humor. Cal Lutheran has a

particular founding story that we have said with great Cal Lutheran pride for many years. It is a story about immigrant people eking out an existence working the land, raising sheep and chickens (selling 1,500 eggs a day in the informal economy), selling assorted baked goods, and harvesting walnuts and citrus. When one looks at the pictures in the Pederson Administration Building of the landscape from over 70 years ago, one sees black and white photographs of people working the land. Who could imagine that others would transform their chicken coops into classrooms?

However, the story does not begin with *that* particular founding story. Rather, the university has centered—and, more importantly, I have centered—the immigrant story of Scandinavian ancestors. In doing so, I have excluded indigenous people who stewarded this land for years. Today I am mindful of the Chumash, Fernandino Tataviam, and Ohlone peoples and their tribal leaders among us. In gratitude for their grit and grace, I thank them and for this land upon which we work, learn, play, and pray.

This history tells us where our feet are standing on the Cal Lutheran campuses.

There are times when a different question emerges. What if the university, what if our mission, was dependent on where our students are standing? Would a notion like that inflame our imagination about the courses we teach, the pedagogy that we utilize, the faculty and staff that

Rev. Melissa Maxwell-Doherty is Vice President for Mission & Identity at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California. This essay comes from her panel presentation at the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, July 2021

we hire and seek to retain, the ministries that we would enable, and the programs and opportunities that would stir up among us? I think it would.

Cal Lutheran has received the designation of being a Hispanic-Serving Institution of higher education. The HSI designation means that 25 percent of the undergraduate students are from Latinx populations. This designation, at its core, is a commitment and responsibility that informs our mission. The challenge is to “become what we are” so that our identity is centered not in enrollment, as crucial as that is, but instead in service. How shall we live into what our inaugural HSI Director, Dr. Paloma Vargas, terms as our “HSI Servingness?”

Cal Lutheran reached the 25 percent threshold of Latinx students in 2013. In 2021, nearly 39 percent of our student population identified as Latinx. This statistic might be surprising high, compared with other ELCA colleges and universities. But it is also surprisingly *low*, given the ethnically diverse populations of the surrounding communities. The Latinx population in two local counties is between 42 and 49 percent.

“Can this place be one in which they can stand, feel a sense of safety, and name it ‘home?’”

Nevertheless, the demographics of Thousand Oaks, the city where our main campus is nested, are different (68 percent white, 18 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Black, 9 percent Asian, and 3 percent two or more races). These demographics impact the sense of belongingness that our students experience, especially first-generation students or those from underrepresented populations. Can this place be one in which they can stand, feel a sense of safety, and name it “home?”

Fifty-three percent of the students are from underrepresented populations. The same is true of only 30 percent of our full-time faculty, 37 percent for exempt staff, 50 percent of our non-exempt staff, 18 percent of our Board of Regents, and 21 percent of the Convocation, the shareholders of the university.

Experts who research belonging inform us of the importance of a rich and varied ethnic, gender identity, and cultural diversity within the institution. *If* our students flourish, they need to interact with and learn alongside leaders, educators, and mentors who share a common background.

Our university has more work to do in this area of belonging.

Thanks to many campus leaders and the work of the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education, we have established a new search and hiring process for faculty with trained equity advocates and anti-bias training. However, human resources has not developed a similar process for staff. More work is needed here.

Promising innovations have expanded our capacity to serve and retain students and employees even as we wrestle with what remains to be reformed. Some of those innovations include:

- The development of a “transfer pathway” and articulation agreement with community colleges. This pathway assists many who are first in their family to attend college and complete their degree taught by dedicated faculty, staff, and admissions personnel who mentor and support them.
- Project CHESS is a collaborative program between Cal Lutheran and a local community college to help students find success by engaging in the classroom, connecting to peer mentors and the campus community, and focusing on careers. Our faculty in this project join a CIRCLE Collaborative, a faculty learning community whose goal is to redesign introductory 100-200 level courses to align pedagogy with the diverse academic needs of historically marginalized students. Our students connect through peer mentorship partnering minoritized men entering their sophomore year at a junior college with rising juniors and seniors at Cal Lutheran.
- The Alexander Twilight Legacy of Black Excellence is a space within the student union named for the first African-American to earn a bachelor’s degree from an American university or college. As the university creates a new strategic plan intersecting with a new master plan,

I will join those who advocate creating similar places for our LGBTQ+, Asian Pacific Island, and Latinx students. To have a place of one's own to be known and seen can enhance the experience of belongingness for our students. I believe that our students need more than just a network of support. Students flourish and go out into the world when they have "networks of networks" as traveling companions for every time and place.

- Five campus affinity groups have been enlarged to support faculty and staff, impacting the retention of gifted employees.
- The Center for Cultural Engagement and Inclusion, campus ministry, and student life team honor cultural celebrations from students' lived histories—including the *Día de Los Muertos*, Pride month, Filipino heritage celebrations, and many more.

Suppose we want a campus environment where all individuals come to trust that they are called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish. In that case, we will need an ongoing commitment to cultural proficiency. I value the language of *Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities*, which states that, in our "openness to the new perspectives and fresh insights of others, these institutions practice a spirit of intellectual humility." I want to add "cultural humility" to this practice as well.

California Lutheran faculty member, Lisa Dahill, writes of "baptizing in local waters," of encouraging religious leaders to leave their buildings, find natural flowing water, and go to those places whenever they are celebrating baptism. In her article "Living, Local, Wild Waters," she writes that using local waters for baptisms would "implicate communities in the health of the water and watershed, recognizing that entrusting infants and adults to these waters requires ongoing collaboration with scientists monitoring a given watershed, activists safeguarding it, other humans living near these waters, and patterns of habitation, pollution, species migration, zoning, and flow affecting it all" (Dahill).

This image of local waters prompts me to think of our students and the importance of place, not only the place

of this land, but also the landscape within each student, in their ancestors, traditions, and ways of being in the world. As my colleague Pastor Hazel Salazar-Davidson reminds me, this is especially true of the Latinx community. These students bring their stories, histories, traumas, and proud occasions with them as they nest within the community. They come to our campus surrounded by their ancestors in their hopes and dreams, in the faithful practices of familial life and food preparation, and in care for multiple generations within their homes. We are to attend to the social location of our students, not simply within our particular zip code, but deeper in the stories that come in, with, and under their life experiences.

"This image of local waters prompts me to think of our students and the importance of place, not only the place of this land, but also the landscape within each student, in their ancestors, traditions, and ways of being in the world."

I have heard it said that "Change happens at the speed of trust. Trust happens at the speed of relationship."

Suppose we are to be the change we seek in the world. In that case, a part of our vocations as colleges and universities of the ELCA is to develop trustworthy relationships of belonging and inclusion in the classroom, field, studio, music hall, residence hall, and workplace *so that all may flourish*.

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KRISTA HUGHES

Community-Building On Campus and Beyond

Although it is located in a small rural town in the middle of the state, Newberry College in a sense belongs to the entire state of South Carolina, which in turn sits on the unseeded lands of the Kusso, Yemassee, Santee, Cherokee, Saluda, and Catawba. Not only does the college have deep connections to the state's historic and cultural roots, but also its current student population mirrors the state's demographics.

Located 154 miles from Charleston, where approximately 40 percent of all enslaved Africans were brought into the United States, Newberry College owes its history to the practice of enslavement. The college's founder, Rev. Dr. John Bachmann, gave the opening blessing at the South Carolina Secession Convention, and he wrote eloquent theological defenses of the institution of slavery (curiously, even as he affirmed, in contrast to other scientific writer of his day, that whites and blacks were of the same species).

Fast forward to today and to who our students are: Newberry is one of the few schools in the state that nearly perfectly mirrors the demographics of South Carolina— in terms of race, gender, socio-economic status, and urban-versus-rural origins. A predominantly white institution, its proportion of minority students reflects the population of the state. Yet it is less reflective of the city and county of Newberry, where there is a slight majority of Black residents, with white residents close

in number and only a tiny percentage of Latinx and Asian residents. Socioeconomically, there is also mirroring, with the City posting a median income is \$31,000, while the student population of the college includes 50 percent first-generation students, 40 percent Pell-eligible students, and a little over 30 percent racial minority students (with significant overlap across these categories).



"Our 'culture of community' has both promise and plenty of room for growth."

Our "culture of community" has both promise and plenty of room for growth. On campus, we are trying to build a culture of true belonging, which is the central theme of the DEI Strategic Plan developed by a Presidential Task Force during the 2020-21 academic year. We conducted a campus-wide campus climate survey (HEDS) and have established a series of listening session opportunities for students to come and speak openly about concerns. Our student

Krista E. Hughes is the director of the Muller Center for Ethics, Vocation, and Civic Engagement and Associate Professor of Religion at Newberry College in Newberry, South Carolina. She is also a facilitator for the community transformation organization, *Speaking Down Barriers*. A white child of the South, she seeks to draw on the beauty and richness of the South's diverse people and cultures while reckoning alongside others with the region's destructive legacies.

orientations and student fairs have had more intentional aims to connect students not only across campus but with the broader community. Finally, in the last couple of years, students have established the Social Justice Club and Spectrum (for LGBTQ+ and allies) with campus-wide impact beyond their small membership sizes.

In and with the city of Newberry, the Muller Center for Exploration and Engagement is heavily involved with civic engagement activities—connecting students, staff, and faculty to opportunities for community-based learning and service opportunities. There's also a strong connection between the athletics department and the community, and the support travels in both directions. There is tremendous community support for the college's sports teams. In turn, our athletic teams lead the campus in volunteer work in the community, followed by the campus's Greek organizations and students in community-engagement courses.

The challenges of building a sense of community on campus and off are plenty, however. First and most central is a basic lack of time and energy. For students, staff, and faculty, schedules are packed with demanding commitments, while community-based education and relationship-building takes time. Even when the desire and will is there, there is scant breathing space.

"This draw to broader activist movements frequently orients students away from the local and toward the national and global issues."

Another challenge is the generational characteristics of Gen Z students, where there tends to be less focus on *service* and more on *activism*, often based on social media. This draw to broader activist movements frequently orients students away from the local and toward the national and global issues. The way technology can mobilize coalitions across space and time is nothing short of miraculous. The challenge is to not sacrifice local relationships and needs.

Whereas that is a challenge for students, there is a specific one for the personnel of Newberry College—namely, the fact that a large proportion of the upper administration and faculty, along with some staff, do not live in the city of Newberry. The community is small, and there is a widespread impression that there is not enough to do and/or the local public schools are not strong enough. This means, however, that the people who live in Newberry the city and the people who work at Newberry the college do not overlap as significantly as they could, which in turn impedes the development of organic relationships of trust, support, and collaboration.

And yet, there are ample signs of hope. Where city-college relationships are good, they are really strong. The mayor and Newberry City Council regularly recognize the college as the largest provider of volunteers in the city, and annually the city holds a ceremony to honor those graduating seniors who have shown strong service to the city during their time as Newberry College students. In addition, there are alumni and alumnae who have chosen to remain in the community following graduation; several now serve in influential positions in the city—from city administration to churches to the local newspaper.

What is more, civic leaders from the community and the campus are currently involved in two significant projects: Coming Together for Newberry, an alliance of people seeking to practice and advance interracial engagement and understanding in Newberry County, and the Gallman School Project, an initiative to acquire and renovate the historically significant Black high school and establish a community center that will provide a range of services and opportunities for the surrounding community.

Finally, the growing number of international corporations coming to the area promises to turn little Newberry into a global city where the possibilities for collaboration among the town, the college, and the business industry will grow.

There is plenty of room to grow in terms of community-building on campus and beyond. There is also a great deal of promise, rooted primarily in the already rich relationships that are possible only in a small town.

MONICA SMITH

Just Communities: From Liberal Arts in Prison to Racial Healing over Zoom

Augustana College is situated in the Quad Cities Area, which is composed of roughly 400,000 citizens on both sides of the Mississippi River. The Quad Cities is the only bend where the Mississippi flows east to west instead of north to south. The people who live Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline (all on the Illinois side), and in Davenport and Bettendorf (in Iowa to our north) are a diverse group—racially, ethnically, and religiously, with a Hindu Temple, two Sikh temples, a new Reform-Conservative blended Jewish synagogue, two masjids (mosques), and a Greek Orthodox church, as well as many Protestant and Catholic congregations. (Just how these five cities add up to the *Quad Cities* is a matter of local debate.)

Our beautiful 130-acre campus straddles our local watershed—known simply as “the slough”—and cuts across “the official boundary line of the Treaty of St. Louis of 1816, which is one in a series of multiple treaties the United States used to claim land from Native Americans that started in 1804” (Carmine 2). Roughly thirty-eight percent of our students are racial and ethnic minorities, which includes both domestic students of color and international students.

I arrived at Augustana College in March 2018 to fill the role of the college’s first vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion and chief diversity officer. I was

attracted to the college for its social justice faith commitment. I was impressed with Augustana’s DEI efforts that led to creating this cabinet level position. The college had had a history of responding to student needs—although some of those responses were more reactionary than proactive.

Also, Augustana was quite introspective in its preparation for a vice president and chief diversity officer. The college developed an inventory of DEI efforts over the past decade or more and included DEI as one of the pillars in the strategic plan. Augustana had laid important groundwork to foster a fertile environment for inclusion and diversity.

In our articulated commitment to social justice—one of the “Five Faith Commitments of Augustana College”—we describe “the development of a campus community that seeks justice, loves kindness, and acts with love and humility.” We describe the commitment further in terms of “making our campus and the wider world a more livable place for all persons by loving and serving the neighbor and by acting against injustice and intolerance.”



Dr. Monica Smith is the inaugural Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. Under her leadership, Augustana received the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award from *Insight into Diversity* magazine in 2019 and 2020. Augustana has twice been recognized by Minority Access, Inc. for its commitment to diversity. In 2021, the college was recognized for improving campus climate and received Diverse Organizational Impact and Transformation (DOIT) certification. Dr. Smith is an administrator, educator, and practitioner who engages the whole college and community partners in her work.

While describing our social justice commitment, we note that “we prioritize engagement in the Quad Cities community, which is for us a focus for our concern and learning.” We are currently taking strides to extend the DEI work done on campus into the Quad Cities, for the benefit of its citizens beside Augustana students and educators. In fact, one of our current strategic goals is to exercise leadership in the Quad Cities.

Although these and other articulations of our “church-relatedness” or our Lutheran institutional vocation were in place a dozen years before I joined the institution, Augustana needed someone to shepherd our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in particular, and to help the campus move from a reactive position to a proactive stance in terms of racial reckoning. We are now advancing the work of institutional change—and this change inevitably and intentionally extends to justice-work within the larger communities.

The social justice commitment certainly drew me here, but that commitment does not stand alone; it is nestled among four other “faith commitments”—those of interfaith engagement, spiritual exploration, reasoned examination of faith, and vocational discernment. Each is complementary to the others. Together, they embody the institution’s missional aims for education of our students and commitment to partner with the Quad Cities community. We offer our educational gifts and seek to create just communities within our surrounding neighborhoods, while also learning from and with community members through various strong partnerships. In these ways, Augustana College is a resource within the community.

For the rest of this essay, I want to exemplify how issues of DEI on campus interface with our understanding of place and working for justice in the surrounding communities. I will share an overview of two efforts that were launched within the past couple years. The brief overview will not do either of them justice, but I do hope it provides a lens through which you can see how our commitment to social justice is lived out on campus and in the surrounding community.

Prison Education

The Augustana Prison Education Program (APEP) launched with a full schedule of credit-bearing liberal arts courses

for ten degree-seeking incarcerated students in the present academic year (Fall 2021). Funded by the Austin E. Knowlton Foundation, the program is a partnership between Augustana College, the Illinois Department of Corrections, and the East Moline Correctional Center (which is perched above the Mississippi River 8 miles to our east). This new initiative is spearheaded by executive director, Dr. Sharon Varallo.

The for-credit, BA-seeking degree program arose from an initiative begun a number of years ago. In 2018, Sharon and Jason Mahn were contacted by a chaplain at the neighboring Monmouth College, inviting our institution to take part in a “Graduated Release Initiative” (GRI)—a study by New York University tracking the effects of college-level courses and other support on rates of recidivism. Sharon took on the task of organizing teaching at East Moline Correctional Center through that program, and she, Jason, and a colleague from the sociology department course taught courses ranging from analyzing the American Dream, to applying the neuroscience of learning, to a course on vocational reflection called, “Lives that Matter.” While much of this was the quiet work of a handful of teachers, it dramatically expanded Augustana’s reach into a part of the Quad Cities community that is cut off from the rest of us.

Sharon tells me now that, already then, she had hoped “to put prison education on the radar of Augustana College as one way we serve out our mission by building bridges from the campus to prison and criminal justice organizations in Illinois and across the country.” The Education Justice Project (EJP), a unit of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as well as the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) through Bard College in New York, quickly became models and conversation partners.

The early forays into prison education (and some informal book clubs with the incarcerated students once the GRI program had concluded), together with guidance from EJP and BPI, led Sharon to shepherd the creation and implementation of APEP—a four-year degree program. The first cohort of students applied by writing responses to literary and nonfiction passages and by answering interview questions about the life of their minds (and spirits). Twenty qualified students were chosen for admittance, but with COVID precautions, ten were able to matriculate. They are currently enrolled in four

classes—completing 14 of the 123 credits needed for graduation (see Faggart for interviews with some students).

For Augustana educators, there are profound professional development benefits of teaching in this program. For APEP students, we hope the benefits are even more profound (and indeed, they tell their instructors so nearly daily). The prison is benefited by meeting its goal of providing substantive services to the incarcerated population to help them prepare for community reintegration. While many Americans may be aware of research that supports the efficacy of education on dramatic reductions in recidivism and dramatically higher likelihood of securing meaningful long-term employment, they may be less aware of the large positive ripple effects of that education on children of incarcerated parents.

From all “sides,” teaching-in-prison is a justice issue. In the aftermath of the passage of the 1994 crime bill, most of the existing college programs across the nation were forced to close, going from an estimated high of 772 higher ed in prison programs in the early 1990s to 8 in 1997. The nonpartisan Prison Policy Initiative reported that in 2005, there were “about a dozen” prison college-degree programs, four of them in New York State (Sawyer). There is a real need to provide access to formal education for those in the system if they are going to improve their chances for being accepted into American communities, which includes healed relationships and sustained, meaningful employment. And, of course, the shutting of educational doors has disproportionately disadvantaged Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC).

As Sharon explained to ten nervous, excited and apprehensive students on the first day of student orientation in the APEP classroom: “We look for great students all over the country. We [Augustana educators] are here because you [the incarcerated students] have great talent and potential, and it is our mission to help prepare students for lives of ‘leadership and service in a diverse and changing world’ *wherever* they might be.” As Sharon later explained to me:

This work matters, and doing it well matters as we live out the mission *to go to places of deep need*. The goal is to build a bridge that is authentically an Augustana bridge, one that is true to the Augustana mission. We have to be the ones to cross that bridge.

Racial Healing

In June 2018, a group of Augustana faculty and staff, along with a member of the local chamber of commerce, participated in the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Institute sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and hosted by Villanova University. We participated in this conference to learn racial healing practices and to consider having a Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation campus center here at Augustana. TRHT Campus Centers are designed “to prepare the next generation of strategic leaders and critical thinkers to break down racial hierarchies and dismantle the belief in the hierarchy of human value” (AACU). It is a national, “community-based initiative that seeks to address the historical and contemporary entanglements of race and racism within our communities. Each TRHT Campus Center prioritizes inclusive, community-based healing activities that seek to change collective community narratives and broaden the understanding of our diverse experiences” (AACU)

Having learned from sessions and collaborations at Villanova (including participation in our own “racial healing circles”), the DEI office now includes the following vision statement:

To develop a systematic, strategic, and sustainable approach to dismantling racism and other hierarchies of human value throughout the Augustana College community and across the Quad Cities region; to bring people to the table and commit to staying at the table doing the work of reconciling our differences and committing to teach and model this for others.

The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and widespread racial violence that spanned 2020 provided the opportunity for Augustana to address more explicitly issues of race, disparate treatment, racialized bias, discrimination, and violence—specifically on and toward Black and Brown people.

The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion outlined a campus plan of actions for the 2020-21 academic year that would increase awareness and knowledge of these issues and offer skill development to empower the campus community and promote social change. As part of the larger “Know Justice Know Peace” initiative, we hosted a number

of Racial Healing conversations, through which we engaged about 500 current students, employees, community members, and alumni in explicit conversations about race.

The on-campus sessions for students and employees sustained open and vulnerable conversations (even over Zoom!) using prompts that unveil early racial awarenesses, identity-formation, and current challenges. Two alumni from Augustana—one Black and one white—agreed to host similar racial healing circles for alumni, and all of us were surprised at the number of alumni who attended and the gratitude they expressed. Commenting on Augustana as a predominantly white institution, one older alumni stated that she was finally given a chance to participate in the political movements of the 60s. [Better late than never!]

We also invited predominantly white, predominantly Black, and multiracial churches in the Quad Cities Area to a series of related conversations. Here, we used the 1619 Project podcast to unpack the history of race in America and the resultant systemic inequalities that exist and continue to produce racial ignorance, intolerance, and violence.

Community engagement also included training for local and regional law enforcement and public safety officials on strategies for building trust within Black and Brown communities. The training was approved through the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board. It was an important way of shifting the power dynamic and bridging the gap between law enforcement and community members by increasing awareness and knowledge; it also acknowledged the inherent tensions between the police and those policed, whether based on perception or realities. Attendees earned continuing education credits for participating.

Toward the end of the 2020-21 academic year, President Steve and Jane Bahls founded the Presidential Racial Justice and Equity Fund, which encourages students to initiate future projects on campus or within the Quad Cities community in order to support similar equity and racial justice work.

Conclusion

Augustana College lives out its Lutheranness and commitment to social justice through intentional efforts at inclusion and community engagement for the purpose of addressing current social ills. Those social ills are

rooted in the discriminatory and exclusionary past of our nation, communities, social institutions—including higher education—and subsequently, of our college. We commit to continue to address contemporary social issues by understanding the deep history of racism and other systemic injustices which have shaped our sense of place. Our understanding of justice acknowledges the need to create policies and practices that produce equitable access to opportunities, power, social goods and services. We must proactively promote these policies in order to eliminate disparities among and between our local community and nation.

Thus, our commitment to social justice demands that we confront current issues that arise from historic sins. But we also work with them—and with our community partners—with courage, hope, and a deep hunger to become communities of peace and justice.

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DARREL D. COLSON

Caught in a Place Between Caesar and God

I've been troubled—deeply troubled—by the state law that prevents me from requiring my students to vaccinate themselves against COVID-19.¹ I always chafe when state or federal law prevents me from making the decisions I think best for the college for which I'm responsible. But, after I grumble a bit, I normally accept the government intrusion and soldier on. This, however, has felt different. I complied with the law, of course, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was doing something wrong, that there was something different about this law and about my compliance with it. Not until I was re-reading Martin Luther's letter, "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," did I finally realize why I couldn't shake the sense that I was doing wrong. This law, unlike any other I have faced, limits our religious liberty, and that fact alone makes me feel not only troubled, but violated, too.

Our school is grounded in the Lutheran tradition, and while not all of our employees or students are Lutherans, the principles by which we make decisions are clearly Lutheran. At the heart of that tradition is Luther's paradoxical claim: "The Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian individual is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all" ("Freedom" 488).

Luther's point is that by our faith, by the grace of God, a Christian enjoys liberation from the burdens of the law, but out of gratitude and love for God, the Christian seeks nothing else but to serve. Luther explains the beckoning arising from gratitude:

I will give myself as a kind of Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see will be necessary, advantageous, and salutary for my neighbor, because through faith I am overflowing with all good things in Christ. (524)



As the discussion about vaccines, proof-of-vaccination mandates, and "vaccine passports" gained momentum in our state, policymakers began to focus on liberty, but a peculiar kind of liberty—the liberty of individuals *not* to vaccinate and nevertheless to have access to every opportunity without regard to how their choices affected others.

The political conversation was jarring, for when we talk about liberty in Lutheran higher education, we naturally understand it as *for* the benefit of others. We don't come at the issue by thinking of our bodies as property to do with as we please. Instead: "In all of one's works a person should ... be shaped by and contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor" (520).

Citing St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Luther asserts that individuals should care for their own bodies for one

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reason only, and that is so that “we can work and save money and thereby can protect and support those who are in need. In this way, the stronger members may serve the weaker and we may be sons [and daughters] of God: one person caring and working for another, ‘bearing one another’s burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ’” (520-21).

Protestants are, of course, keenly interested in personal liberty; indeed, Luther himself insisted that a Christian must be bound by his or her own conscience, not by the instructions of some prominent person in a bureaucratic hierarchy. Hence, the paradox: lord of all, servant of all.

If Wartburg College were allowed to engage the question whether to require or not to require vaccinations of our students, I don’t pretend to know how we’d come down. We would, after all, have to balance the freedom of conscience against the duty to neighbor. And, of course, valuing freedom of association, we know that our college is not for everyone, and that whatever we decided might cause some students to look elsewhere for a school that balances those demands differently.

“To have the question simply prejudged by our legislators, to be told by them that I cannot consider the choices in front of us on the basis of our deeply held commitments, is more painful than I would have imagined.”

What I do know, however, is that we must, to be faithful to our principled convictions, grapple with the question sincerely, weighing the alternatives thoughtfully and prayerfully. And we would start by acknowledging that we enjoy liberty for a reason, and that is to serve others. To have the question simply prejudged by our legislators, to be told by them that I cannot consider the choices in front of us on the basis of our deeply held commitments, is more painful than I would have imagined.

I grew up in the Bible belt; I attended a Baptist high school. I have witnessed the passion of my fellow Southerners, my former neighbors, when they bristle at any government interference in the practice of their faith. I’ve always felt deep sympathy for them, for I can see, even feel, their anguish in

those moments. Until now, however, I had not experienced that level of government interference myself. I had not felt as violated as they have. Not until now. And now I stand where my evangelical neighbors have stood; now I feel the anguish, too.

It’s a weighty thing to know without doubt that I’m not living out my faith, that in that conflict between Caesar and God, I’ve chosen Caesar. And yet, in my role, as president of a college, I cannot disobey the law. The penalty for conscientious objections or noncompliance would fall not on me, but on my institution and the students I serve. The compromise I’ve made is frightful. It’s the kind of compromise that imperils one’s soul.

When Luther gives advice to his contemporaries after an outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1527, he again frames his discussion around service to neighbor. In the midst of plague, he observes, we see two kinds of sinful response. Facing the dangerous disease, some despair, lose their faith, and “desert our neighbors in their troubles” (Luther, “Whether” 399). Others, however, facing the same danger, are

much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but instead lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. (“Whether” 403)

Luther’s mention of independence echoes the refrain we hear in our own day—the claim by some that the paramount issue is liberty, specifically, an individual’s right to disdain “medicines,” that is, the vaccines that can put an end to this pandemic.

How shameful it is, he continues, for these libertarians (or, perhaps more accurately, libertines)

to pay no heed to their own bodies and to fail to protect them against the plague the best they are able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if they had taken care of their bodies as they should have. They are thus responsible before God for their neighbor’s death and are a murderer many times over. (403)

Extraordinarily strong language, that. Those who fail to take heed, who refuse to adopt the strongest measures, bear responsibility for the spread of the plague and the deaths it causes.

Not only does Luther catalogue and condemn sinful responses; he also offers advice:

You ought to think this way: Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly refuse. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. (404)

His fundamental concern throughout the letter is welfare of neighbor. Above and beyond considerations of my own preferences, my own independence or liberty, I should carefully and persistently consider my neighbors, especially the most vulnerable. It is not for the vulnerable to stay clear of me or the common spaces we share, such as stores or schools; it is for me to avoid visiting those places if I might pose any danger to others.

"Either I defy the law and imperil my school, or I obey the law and imperil my neighbors."

When one reads our college's mission statement, Luther's moral framework is clearly there. We are dedicated, we say, to preparing students for lives of leadership and service in their communities, which expresses our belief that people are called into communities, where they are grounded in relationships with others, and where their choices affect others and should serve others. These are powerfully, deeply held commitments, rooted in the faith of our founders, and they require me as the responsible officer to weigh them carefully. It's not too great a leap to see that if my decisions lead to the deaths of others, I too am negligent, perhaps even a "murderer many times over."

And yet, the law is clear; it walls me off from our faith, from our deeply grounded values. It creates a stark choice. Either I defy the law and imperil my school, or I obey the law and imperil my neighbors. One solution might be to resign rather than forsake faith; and yet, making that choice does nothing for the neighbor who'd have to step into my shoes. She or he would face the same dilemma, and I can hardly shift my worries onto another, for that would place my own welfare before another's.

My government has boxed me in, abridging my own expression of faith and leaving me no way out but to put someone else in this compromising situation. That may just be the purpose of this particular law—to compel those of us committed to the service of neighbors to forsake that commitment, and even to go one step further, to tempt us to put self-interest above the interest of neighbor.

Scattered around the Wartburg campus are crosses bearing artistic depictions of Matthew 25:35-40. Called the "Life Cross," these images remind us that when we serve those in need—offering food to the hungry, welcome to the stranger, comfort to the ill—we are serving God. I feel as if lawmakers have turned that message on its head, urging us to ignore the needy, to serve ourselves, to endanger the ill. I fear not only for my soul, but for the souls of us all.

Endnotes

1. Iowa's Law, House File 889, bans businesses and government entities from requiring people coming onto their campuses/premises to prove they have been vaccinated before entering. The law includes churches and private colleges. See "Richardson" below.

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Hospitality to the Wild



“Everyone says they love Mother Nature, but they never invite her over to their houses!”

Niel Diboll’s comment was greeted with sympathetic laughter from the subjects of my research, members of an organization called Wild Ones Native Landscaping.¹ These

mostly retired homeowners joined the Wild Ones because they want to prioritize native plants in their landscaping efforts. Diboll was speaking at an annual conference which, to my eyes, also doubled as a kind of tent revival: an opportunity for members to reaffirm their commitments to a worldview and practice somewhat at odds with the mainstream (Diboll).

Most buildings feature lawns and bushes; not the houses of the Wild Ones. The Wild Ones members dig up their lawns and plant prairies; they eschew begonias and pansies for native flowers; they tirelessly dig up invasive species; they restore forests and wetlands, plant native “weeds,” and welcome wildlife to their land. It’s an effort towards sustainability, a piecemeal restoration of functioning ecosystems in the aftermath of human domination.

These people are the ones who *do* invite mother nature to their houses. Doing so is not easy. All landscaping takes time and effort, but native landscaping requires even

more, particularly in its beginning phases.² Why bother? They do it for the reasons you might expect—an attraction to the beauty of the plants, a desire to remedy problems of drainage or access, or an effort to un-do some of the harms perpetrated by human action on the land. But according to my interviews with members of the Fox Valley (WI) Area Chapter of the Wild Ones, I discovered another, surprising motivation: hospitality to insects and birds.

Douglas W. Tallamy, author of a Wild Ones’ favorite, *Bringing Nature Home*, clearly lays out a plan for hospitable native landscaping as follows: native birds require native insects, and native insects require native plants, so hospitality to native birds requires a garden of native plants (Tallamy 13-17). One member I interviewed boasted that owls had come to his property after following Tallamy’s advice. Another member gushed to me about her native butterfly garden, which attracts a panoply of native insects, including Monarchs. Clearly, hosting these insect visitors gave her deep joy.

At a gathering of the group, I asked if anyone was interested in native edible plants—plants that humans might forage and enjoy—but the answer was no. One member said that she would rather feed insects and birds than feed herself: she prioritized a posture of hospitality

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toward others through her landscaping (Hartman). Others agreed: their main concern was to host these “underdog” organisms who struggle to find a home in our all-too-human world.

“Their main concern was to host these ‘underdog’ organisms who struggle to find a home in our all-too-human world.”

At a recent conference, I heard an extraordinary paper: “Creature Comfort: Foundations for Christian Hospitality Toward Non-human Animals” by Marilyn L. Matevia. Matevia examines the plight of wild animals in a human-dominated landscape, and calls Christians to a “radical, kenotic, challenging, potentially costly kind of hospitality” towards animals (6). She draws on robust traditions of Christian hospitality to the stranger, rooted in norms from the Hebrew Bible and parables such as the Good Samaritan. Matevia concludes that we should, at the least, “protect existing habitat,” create “sanctuary spaces for animals that have been displaced,” build “wildlife corridors over highways,” find ways to help migratory animals deal with border walls, and similar basic measures to minimize harm to the wild animals with whom we share a home (18-19). Matevia is calling for humans to create safe, hospitable spaces for animals in our too-human contexts.³

In the discussion after the paper presentation, someone questioned this idea of human hospitality to non-humans. Isn’t God the true host, the real proprietor of wild spaces? Who are we to consider ourselves hospitable, as if we’re in charge here? I had wondered something similar about the Wild Ones— isn’t there some kind of false *noblesse oblige* or even grandiosity in the idea that it is up to us, the heroic humans, to extend a welcome to poor suffering plants and animals?

In spite of this critique, there is some truth to the implied power dynamic: we humans do have power over other creatures. Why do the Wild Ones members use their land to feed birds and insects rather than feeding themselves? Because these humans get their food from a grocery

store. They have options; the Monarchs don’t. Wild nature is vulnerable in this situation. Indeed, nature’s vulnerability brings out the Wild Ones members’ heroic side when they participate in plant rescues. A plant rescue occurs when some patch of native vegetation is under threat from construction; word goes out among club members, and they converge on the site, spiriting the native plants to a location safe from the bulldozers. Humans are the heroes for the vulnerable vegetation in this tale.

Whether we should or not, humans do control—or at least influence—a very large proportion of the world’s ecosystems. We have the power to destroy it all; any bit of wildness that exists, exists because we have decided not to obliterate it. I want to believe that God is the true host and ultimate proprietor, but we have a vital role, too. We are the stewards, the gatekeepers, the bouncers at the doors to the club. We are the ones who can exercise hospitality to animals, or choose not to. What does the situation demand of us?

“We are the ones who can exercise hospitality to animals, or choose not to. What does the situation demand of us?”

Both Matevia and the Wild Ones represent an appeal to our “better angels,” asking us to embrace the virtue of hospitality as we help those who are worse off—the animals or plants seeking to live their lives in a world controlled by humans.

Some of my research subjects were descended from pioneers who they referred to as “sodbusters.” These ancestors came to the Midwestern prairies and imagined farmland; they enacted their vision by busting up the sod, plowing the prairie and planting row crops. Now, their descendants who are Wild Ones members both make excuses—“they had to make a living; they didn’t know how much damage they were causing”—and make changes, bringing the prairie back to the land once more.

Groups like the Wild Ones try to reverse human damage to the land, to go from desolation to community. They are like healers, restoring what was lost and conjuring vibrant interconnected ecosystems where there once were sterile

lawns. They can do this, in part, because they are able to envision a world with no lawns, where the prairies are put back: a world in which “landscaping with native plants becomes the norm” (Wild Ones: About). There is a backward-looking nostalgia here, a longing for a time before colonization and civilization bent the wild toward pursuit of profit or narrow, cultivated versions of the beautiful.

Scholars like Matevia also deploy imagination. Matevia talks about hospitality to animals as “restorative justice,” implementing this virtue of hospitality in the service of habitat restoration (17). Our faith demands that in cases of injustice, or ruptured relationships, we put back what was lost: restore habitat, create wildlife corridors, build bridges and tunnels and ladders for wildlife to handle the roads and the dams. This, too, involves the imagination, as Matevia exhorts us to make manifest in this world something that ought to be, but is not yet here.

“Hospitality *should* stretch and challenge us.”

All of these represent the “ecological imaginary,” that is, the human vision of what a specific natural space should be, by contrast with what it is (Foster and Sandberg 196). That imagination holds tremendous transformative power. We can’t change something until we can imagine it changed. And the changes don’t stop with the Wild Ones members’ homes or Matevia’s dam ladders. Christian hospitality extends as far as Christian stewardship extends—over the whole earth, including our neighborhoods and farms, our parking lots and roads, our churches and our colleges. We are called to recognize what is, and what has been lost—and to imagine what should be restored or renewed.

There may be a downside to hospitality. Do we really want to welcome someone dangerous, offensive, or unpleasant into our homes? Maybe there’s a reason we don’t invite Mother Nature to our houses: if she brings dirt, disease, or disgust, she may be an unwelcome guest. For example, some churches in Great Britain have struggled with bats, which are protected by law and cannot be eradicated from church buildings, even if their presence disrupts the worship.⁴ This may present a very difficult conundrum, but Matevia wishes to challenge us: “the

practice of hospitality privileges the stranger over the insider, and honors difference over sameness” (8). In other words, hospitality *should* stretch and challenge us.

There are mutually satisfactory solutions to the bat problem—and to other drawbacks of hospitality to the wild. In the spirit of this challenge, Matevia argues, we are called to exercise hospitality to non-human animals and in so doing, repair relationships we may not even realize had been ruptured. For the Wild Ones members, inviting the wild to live in their back yards is both sufficient challenge and groundwork for relationship repair. One member I interviewed referred to the birds and insects on her property as “neighbors,” proudly recounting her friendly interactions with them as they shared a prairie plot. “Whose earth is it anyway?” James Cone has rightly asked, pointing to racial disparities in environmental work. The answer to his question must include a diversity of people; it must also include the diverse tapestry of non-humans who also call these landscapes home:

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God. (Psalm 84:3, NRSV)

If the psalmist can imagine birds finding a welcome in the temple, what about our other institutions? Can a desolate parking lot become host to a vibrant community, to an ecosystem? Can a college campus foster not just human diversity but biodiversity? What would a hospitable form of sustainability look like in our institutions? We may not even realize that a parking lot is stifling a floodplain, or that pesticide practices are threatening pollinators, or that bright lights at night are preventing fireflies from

“Can a college campus foster not just human diversity but biodiversity? What would a hospitable form of sustainability look like in our institutions?”

communicating well. But once we tap into an ecological imaginary, we see what has been lost, and we can see the possibilities for restoration and renewal all around us.

With Matevia, I want to appeal to our “better angels” and ask how we might welcome the non-human in our lives, in our spaces, and in our institutions. It is time to reverse some of the damage done to the non-human world, to open our doors to Mother Nature’s knock. Whether God is the ultimate host or not, we are the gatekeepers. Let us imagine, and then implement, a hearty welcome to the diversity of God’s creatures, as we welcome strangers and friends.

Endnotes

1. The research of this essay was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

2. A well-established native landscape may not require more maintenance than traditional landscaping. Unlike traditional landscaping, native plants rarely need extra water or fertilizer. But to establish a native landscape requires significant extra work in the beginning, to eradicate current invasives and continue to shield slow-growing native seeds from aggressive invasives over time.

3. She doesn’t get into the questions raised by farmed animals or domesticated animals. For some, these might indicate a kind of mutual hospitality in which we provide for the animals who also provide for us. At the same time, it seems to violate a standard of hospitality to kill one’s guest, which is the case for nearly all farmed animals.

4. Thankfully, the Bats In Churches partnership is seeking solutions so the bats can be unharmed and the worship can go on (see <https://www.batsandchurches.org.uk/>).

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Return to Purpose: Learning in an Age of Collapse



"In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." | ERIC HOFFER

Liberal arts education in the United States has experienced quite a few upheavals since 2007, the year I joined Concordia College.¹ First came the financial crisis and the great recession, followed by the crisis of the humanities. Then a deadly pandemic arrived, causing yet another shock to enrollments and revenue. As I write these lines, new challenges—more disruptive than the current ones—are on the horizon. It is high time we confront the following questions: How well have we managed these crises? How prepared are we to meet future ones?

Crises are not just unfortunate occurrences; they are also *signs* that invite interpretation, discussion, and reflection. Crises tell us that we need to pause whatever we have been doing and turn our attention inwards, think about where we are and how we got here, and decide whether a change of direction is warranted. This imperative becomes increasingly urgent as the interval between crises becomes shorter and shorter—for that, too, is a sign. It is, of course, necessary to deal with whatever

is demanding our immediate attention, but treating a patient's acute symptoms is no substitute for diagnosing the underlying disease. It is tempting to evade responsibility by blaming impersonal forces beyond our control, but that attitude is reactive and disempowering; it does nothing to improve our resilience or our capacity to rise up to the occasion.

Throughout this period of crises, colleges have tried to mitigate their troubles as best as they could. Increasingly, however, their best is just not good enough. The main reason, in my view, is that their responses have been driven by a fragmented view of reality. If donations are down, let's increase tuition or improve fundraising; if enrollments are low, let's ramp up marketing and recruiting; if expenses are high, let's downsize the faculty. When these piecemeal measures fail to deliver, the standard response is to intensify the effort—as if doing *more* of the same will lead to *different* outcomes. Rarely do leaders entertain the possibility that the fault may lie in some of their own assumptions.

Two critical assumptions have been especially problematic. First, decision-makers have assumed that these

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difficulties are temporary. Once the pandemic is over, once the economy recovers, once the birth rate goes back up again, once the donations start coming in—then everything will return to normal. As a result, colleges have used strategies that are essentially about *buying time*. Underlying this approach is the assumption that, except for an occasional glitch or two, the world in the coming decades will remain essentially the same as it has been in the recent past.

Second, decision-makers have assumed that higher education's leadership and management model is basically sound and need not be questioned, let alone changed in fundamental ways. They have assumed that better alternatives either don't exist at all or, if they do, are too utopian for the real world. Any attempt to modify how colleges are run is futile, either because the current model cannot be improved upon or because the effort required is not worth it. In effect, all we need are a few small, incremental changes.

"The environment within which colleges function is rapidly becoming unstable."

Notice that the first assumption implies the second, for if the difficulties are temporary then, obviously, no major transformation is needed. As I argue below, however, the environment within which colleges function is rapidly becoming unstable in an unprecedented way—where "environment" refers to the totality of our ecological and socio-historical context. If that's the case, then the assumptions that normalcy will return and business-as-usual will continue are not just problematic; they are outright *dangerous*. These assumptions create a false sense of optimism, narrow the range of available options, and increase institutional vulnerability. They constrain imagination, stifle creativity, and obviate the need for thinking outside the proverbial box.

Learning from Failure

Chris Argyris (d. 2013) of Harvard Business School was quite familiar with this dynamic, which he described in

terms of two types of learning. To understand these types, consider the fact that the *strategies* that leaders employ to achieve organizational goals are based on particular *assumptions* about how the world works, and that leaders use the resulting *outcomes* to measure the effectiveness of their strategies. If the outcomes turn out to be unsatisfactory, then it follows that strategies are flawed and need to be changed. This is called "single-loop" learning, or *problem-solving*. However, if leaders are willing to allow the feedback from reality to illuminate not only their strategies but also the underlying assumptions, then they have the opportunity to learn in a much more profound way; this is called "double-loop" learning.

Double-loop learning allows leaders to go deeper than mere problem-solving. If they find that their assumptions were invalid, outdated, or inapplicable, they can replace them with more accurate and appropriate ones. Knowing that the problems were stemming not from the strategies but from the underlying assumptions is a priceless insight, for it allows them to reconsider not just the intended outcomes but also the deeper goals and values. In this way, double-loop learning empowers the leaders to make *fundamental changes* in how they think and act, thereby increasing the chances of achieving better outcomes.

In a famous article, "Teaching Smart People How to Learn," Argyris points out that it is difficult to institutionalize double-loop learning because successful professionals are often too smart for their own good:

Because many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure. So whenever their single-loop learning strategies go wrong, they become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the "blame" on anyone and everyone but themselves. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it the most.

One might ask: If these professionals haven't experienced many failures in the past, why are they failing now? The answer lies in *change*. In a stable environment, there is no need to question the inherited assumptions; leaders can succeed simply by doing what they have

always done, while addressing any problems on a case-by-case basis. But conventional problem-solving doesn't work so well during periods of rapid and disruptive change. Since most leaders are not used to turning the critical and analytical lens back on their own assumptions, they keep using the same old strategies long after they have stopped working.

If the current difficulties of higher education were caused by random events, similar to the ones that have happened many times in the past, then single-loop learning would have sufficed. The reason why the usual strategies are not effective this time around is because we are living in a time when both natural and social systems are breaking down, causing the environment to become increasingly unstable and unpredictable. An environment undergoing rapid deterioration is a breeding ground for crises, each worse than the one before. Some of our most basic assumptions have already become obsolete while many others are starting to fall apart, creating an urgent need for double-loop learning.

Systems Thinking and Soft Landings

To understand the big picture, begin by considering the nature of *systems*. A system is a coherent network of interconnected parts. Every system, whether natural or social, has an upper *limit* that it is not supposed to cross. That's because the longer a system is forced to function above its optimal capacity—i.e., the longer it remains in *overshoot*—the more susceptible it becomes to *collapse* (Catton). Our global, hyper-connected human community is also a complex system, one that includes all of our social arrangements, political institutions, and economic flows that make up our "civilization." Like any other system, human civilization is subject to the inescapable logic of overshoot and collapse (Rockström). For the last half century, civilization has been operating beyond its optimal limits, and, as a result, it is now in a state of collapse—a relatively fast decline in standards of living, social complexity, and population. In non-euphemistic language, this means large-scale death, destruction, and suffering.

The mechanism of our global predicament can be described as follows: Human civilization is built *on*

top of natural systems, in the sense that these natural systems are absolutely necessary for maintaining the physical conditions that make organized human society possible, not to mention life itself. As the global human system expands, it consumes more resources and produces more waste—until it starts compromising the very natural systems on which it is utterly dependent (Meadows). Much of what we celebrate as progress in the modern era was made possible by fossil-fuel driven industrialization, a phenomenon that also led to an unprecedented enlargement of our ecological footprint. The process of expansion took a sharp upward turn in the post-WWII period when economic growth, as measured by the GDP, became the dominant measure of social progress—commonly known as "development" (Steffen). Just as an extravagant lifestyle cannot be maintained indefinitely on borrowed money, the expansion of human numbers and standards of living cannot continue forever on a finite planet. No wonder, then, that natural systems have started to collapse at an accelerating pace, with climate disruption being the most imminent threat to the human enterprise (Catton; Rockström; Jamail; Wallace-Wells; and Lynas).

"Having seen the big picture, we can appreciate that the current difficulties of higher education are merely a foretaste of what some scientists are calling humanity's 'ghastly future.'"

Planetary breakdown and civilizational collapse are mutually reinforcing phenomena, which means we can expect to see more and more crises in the foreseeable future. While our predicament is global, its manifestations are necessarily local and varied; the same predicament is affecting different societies—and different sectors within each society—in very different ways. Having seen the big picture, we can appreciate that the current difficulties of higher education are merely a foretaste of what some scientists are calling humanity's "ghastly future" (Bradshaw).

During times of upheaval, the typical human response is to try to maintain the status quo by any means necessary. Leaders in higher education, just like successful professionals elsewhere, tend to rely on their *experience* when making decisions. But they acquired this experience during the relatively stable environment of the past, which renders it much less useful for dealing with an entirely unprecedented situation. In a time of decline and disruption, sticking to what we have always done is tantamount to risking irrelevance at best and extinction at worst.

“There is a lot we can still do to ensure that our descent is, for the most part, gradual, peaceful, humane, and equitable, as opposed to sudden, violent, catastrophic, and oppressive.”

In order for humanity to respond effectively to its global predicament, every community and every organization must be able to think and act in creative ways. I use the word “response” in relation to collapse because it is simply too late for prevention. However, just because we cannot avoid the fall doesn’t mean there are no opportunities for meaningful action. There is a lot we can still do to ensure that our descent is, for the most part, gradual, peaceful, humane, and equitable, as opposed to sudden, violent, catastrophic, and oppressive. When it comes to developing creative responses to the ongoing collapse in order to ensure a “soft landing,” our institutions of higher education have a special responsibility for leading the way. Fulfilling that responsibility, however, involves fundamental changes in how colleges function. Denying the need for the required transformation may be tempting, but the current state of our predicament has *already* shattered many of the long-established paradigms within which we are used to executing our pedagogical, scholarly, and administrative duties. To continue functioning as if those paradigms were still intact involves sacrificing our intellectual integrity as well as our commitment to the welfare of the younger generation. Moreover, as the planetary and civilizational collapse progresses, the resources on which

colleges have traditionally relied will continue to dwindle; as a result, the prevailing model of leadership and management will increasingly lose its legitimacy, forcing us to look for more viable alternatives (Laloux). As our students become better aware of the ongoing collapse and its terrifying implications for their future, they will start questioning the practical value of our course offerings. In response, we will have to learn how to teach our students a significantly different set of skills than what we have been teaching them so far.

As we anticipate the challenges that faculty, administrators, and students are most likely to face in the coming decades, a simple choice appears: We can either initiate the necessary transformation now, or we can wait until we are compelled by the brute force of circumstances to make those same changes. Either way, the option of maintaining business-as-usual is no longer on the menu.

Return to Purpose and Learning to Learn

How can colleges make the fundamental changes that will allow them to thrive in an increasingly unstable and unpredictable environment? The first thing to note is that all change involves learning. In fact, psychologists define the term “learning” as *change in behavior as a result of experience*, where “behavior” refers to observable actions as well as private or mental events, such as thinking. The college, as an institution, is designed for *teaching*, but the global predicament that humanity is facing demands that the college becomes adept at *learning*. Indeed, I would argue that the college needs to rapidly evolve into a “learning organization,” an institution that is able and willing to change its behavior in response to the changing environment so that it can continue serving its purpose. The concept of “learning organizations” was popularized by Peter Senge in the early 1990s, who described them as places “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge 1).

This raises a critical question: Can colleges learn how to learn? Any institution can become a learning organization, provided it can overcome its own resistance to

change. Consider the fact that some of the most intelligent, perceptive, and knowledgeable individuals are found within our institutions of higher education. This might lead an ordinary person to assume that colleges must be bastions of good judgment and foresight. Unfortunately,

“Any fundamental change requires a strong culture of collaboration, but our colleges follow a scheme of governance that assumes competition among interest groups, incentivizing both departments and individual employees to focus on their own short-term interests.”

individual brilliance not only interferes with our capacity for double-loop learning, it also does not automatically translate into institutional wisdom. The culprit, of course, is *organizational culture*. The modern college is a highly conservative institution, and the ascendance of neoliberalism since the 1980s has only strengthened that characteristic. Change is difficult for any organization, but it is especially tricky for the college that takes pride in its long-standing traditions and depends heavily on the support of its alumni. The “Big Money” donors—whether in politics, culture, or philanthropy—tend to dislike fundamental change, for obvious reasons. In addition, any fundamental change requires a strong culture of collaboration, but our colleges follow a scheme of governance that assumes competition among interest groups, incentivizing both departments and individual employees to focus on their own short-term interests. Furthermore, the conservative nature of the college tends to intensify during crises, making it even more risk-avoidant at a time when organizational flexibility is most needed.

Yet, culture is created and maintained through human choices, which means we can change much of our organizational culture by committing to alternative choices. There is, of course, an entire science of deliberate culture change—called *applied cultural evolution*—that we can draw upon. The task, however, is enormous, and no single individual can provide a complete roadmap for how colleges should move forward in this absolutely

unfamiliar terrain. The project is best pursued through multidisciplinary endeavors led by *collapse-aware* “communities of practice” (Wenger).

Not being able to offer a roadmap, I will nevertheless suggest a starting point for this journey—a *return to purpose*.

If we trace any successful endeavor to its origin, we are likely to find a small group of people coming together to serve a shared purpose. Over time, however, there is a tendency for purpose to get sidelined, as more and more energy flows into maintaining a particular set of policies, processes, and procedures. Essentially, the means turn into ends, and people become much more committed to the “what” and the “how” than they are to the “why.” Just like single-loop learning, this state of affairs can continue in a stable environment but quickly becomes a liability under conditions of rapid and disruptive change. As the storm intensifies around us, so does our need for a spiritual anchor, a more reliable moral compass, and a deeper wellspring of strength and creativity. Human beings can meet almost any challenge, but only if they are energized by a shared purpose that is worthy of their commitment and sacrifice, one that transcends their everyday concerns while also embodying their deepest values.

A return to purpose would therefore require colleges to re-examine their values, both actual and professed, and to notice any mismatch between the two. All too often, colleges become obsessed with the financial bottom line, treating it as their ultimate concern. This attitude neglects the fact that human beings do not live by bread alone and that the cosmos, as we experience it, is made up of stories rather than soulless atoms. Ultimately, the health of an institution depends a lot less on its endowment, revenue, and enrollment, and a lot more on its *spiritual* wealth, which can only come from a community’s relationship with a higher purpose, from its collective sense of “why.” Even though “result-oriented” leaders tend to be cynical about the reality of the spirit, it is still disconcerting to encounter that mindset in religiously affiliated colleges. The *real* bottom line is that God—or history—cannot be deceived by slogans. Ultimately, we are judged by what we actually do, and not by what we say on our brochures and websites. Better marketing can never compensate for a lack of higher purpose, for the issue is not *how* we tell our story but whether we have a story *worth telling*.

Both purpose and values are ultimately about *meaning*. Human beings can always find a sense of meaning in their experience, regardless of how harsh and hopeless their circumstances might be. As educators living in the age of collapse, we are therefore confronted with the following questions: What is the meaning of our vocation in this unique historical moment? Given the reality of planetary and civilizational collapse, what do we owe our students? What do we owe society? How should colleges that claim a religious heritage and a transcendent purpose respond to the unfolding global predicament? What is the most meaningful thing we can do at this time, in this situation?

“How should colleges that claim a religious heritage and a transcendent purpose respond to the unfolding global predicament?”

In my view, there is probably no way out, but there is definitely a way *in*. So far, we have avoided acknowledging the *full* catastrophe of the ongoing planetary and civilizational collapse—to ourselves, to our students, or both—mainly because we think it would lead to paralyzing despair and inaction. But that isn’t true. The end of optimism does not mean the impossibility of meaningful action, just as the diagnosis of a terminal illness does not mean that one is no longer morally responsible. Reality must be accepted, no matter how unpleasant, but *acceptance* is not synonymous with giving up. Rather, accepting the reality of collapse is a necessary prerequisite for clarifying our values, determining what we want to save and what we need to let go, and then responding to the call of our time with wisdom, compassion, and creativity. Some of the most creative responses to the global predicament, especially the climate crisis, are emerging from within the informal networks of people who have accepted the inevitability of collapse—the “deep adaptation” network being a prominent example—and not from the techno-optimists, who are essentially in a state of denial (Bendell and Read).

What, then, shall we do? As a first step, I suggest that colleges need to turn inwards so they can discover—or create—a new sense of shared purpose, one that takes into account our global predicament and may therefore

become *more* meaningful as the world goes deeper into collapse. It is only *after* we have taken this first step that we would be able to see the rest of our path.

Endnotes

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