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THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME

From Cardinal Newman to Harry Potter

By Christopher Boscia

Herman Melville opened *Moby Dick* with “Call me Ismael,” the imperative that marked the reader’s entry into the narrator’s odyssey. Queequeg’s “little god” told Ismael to choose a whaling ship. Despite never having been on one, Ismael chose the Pequod for its good looks. There he met Captain Ahab, described by the vessel’s owner as a “grand, ungodly, god-like man” who “keeps close inside the house” and is “above the common...[having] been in colleges, as well as among cannibals.” What followed for Ismael was uncertainty, tragedy, triumph and, ultimately, the increase in self-awareness that comes from enduring all three. This story captures so much of the college experience for me.

After six years living as a resident minister at Santa Clara University and at Boston College, I am quite familiar with the freshman imperative: “Call me <insert i.m. screen name here>.” Although a few may begin the odyssey because of our rich Jesuit, Catholic tradition, most grace our campus for the palm trees, successful sports teams, or other seemingly arbitrary reasons. What do these uncertain freshmen find when they arrive? Arrrrgh...Ahab, the faculty or staff member, the “grand, ungodly, god-like man (or woman!)” who “keeps close inside the house” and is “above the common...[having] been in colleges, as well as among the cannibals.” Translation: students find some larger-than-life agnostics who pontificate, only in their classrooms or offices, never to be seen in the residence halls, where the cannibals live. What follows? Our students experience growing pains, learn about their gifts, find profound joy, and finally graduate, knowing a bit more about themselves than when they started—despite the Ahabs in our midst.

The imperative statement that opens *Moby Dick* invites us to hear anew the timid command of the freshmen searching for his identity: “Don’t label me yet!” This imperative echoes in our own hearts. How many times have university employees been marginalized by the general public for liv-

ing in the “bubble” of academia, disconnected from the “real” world? How often do we wish for a second chance from that supervisor or department chair who wrote us off too quickly after a rash comment? Even the above characterization of faculty and staff as “the new Ahabs” may strike some as a gross generalization. It is true: if we do not appreciate being labeled, then we should not pin labels on our students. Instead, we have an opportunity to answer the imperative call of the freshman by plunging ourselves into the particulars of their lives, to enter into sustained conversation over time that will transform “them” and “us.”

To understand how educators in the Jesuit tradition can meet the needs of this new generation, we must tweak the question raised by this issue of *Conversations* slightly, drawing the focus away from “disconnects” and towards what we know best—the tradition of Jesuit education. Therefore, what is the manner in which faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students enter critically into the education and formation of today’s undergraduates? Perhaps John Henry Newman can awaken in us a new awareness of what is in the Ignatian academic tradition.

Newman and Restoration of the Interpersonal in Higher Education

Modern thought on university education owes a debt to the work of John Henry Newman. In *The Idea of a University*, as Michael Buckley, S.J. points out, Newman offers us four characteristics of higher education that most can agree upon (Buckley S.J., Michael. In the Augustine Cardinal Bea, S.J., Lecture at Santa Clara University, November 2006).

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First, much of the “learning” in a University occurs in the “conversations and chance remarks, presentations and lectures, the give and take of papers or of extended arguments, the intellectual excitement evoked or communicated” when a teacher interacts with a student (Buckley). Interactions with teachers both inside and outside of the classroom are indispensable for university learning as envisaged by Newman.

Second, the formation of students is fundamentally what Newman meant by education. “As teaching [is] the university’s essential activity, so its product is not science nor art nor the advancement of knowledge, but the students, the development of the students” (Buckley).

Third, in order to successfully educate our students, they require the unique intellectual community that is the university (Buckley). On-line education is no substitute for the university experience. Moreover, precisely by living in the University, students begin to understand the integration of the various disciplines and the intellectual and personal adjustments necessary to live in community.

Fourth, the university residential communities—what Newman called “the colleges”—become like a “home” for their inhabitants. “The college was to provide security, refuge, shelter, moral training, instruction...and to become ‘the shrine of our best affections, the bosom of our fondest recollections, a spell upon our after life, a stay for the world-weary mind and soul’” (Newman).

These four characteristics embodied the true purpose and constitution of a University. I take these as foundational characteristics of any university that calls itself Jesuit.

However, Newman’s characteristics of a university education do not mirror what is offered in contemporary American institutions. While many in higher education label today’s students as “disconnected” through abuse of technology, more interested in “virtual” than person-to-person contact, un-churched, violent and prone to binge drinking, the institutions themselves fail to live up to Newman’s ideal. As Buckley points out, Newman thought the University, through its colleges, ought to attend to the humane and religious formation of its students. The embodiment and instrument of this formation was found in the “tutor.” The tutor lived in the college, exercising “irreplaceable personal relation, guidance, and influence over the students” (Buckley). The tutor would remain bound as a permanent member of the college, even as he (or she) passed through various positions within the larger university, including professor, scholar, and administrator.

Today, the few employees from the residence life department who do live “in residence” are not trained

specifically to attend to the humane and religious formation of students. In my experience, their shelf life can be even quicker than that of a student, averaging three years in the position. It is hard to hold sustained conversations with students amidst frequent turnover in residential personnel.

Are today’s students really interested in an older member of the University community moving into the residence halls and being charged with the “care of souls,” as Newman described the role of the tutor? Absolutely! The archetypal college experience for today’s generation is found at Hogwarts, home to Harry Potter and his band of mischievous wizards. At Hogwarts, students anxiously await as the “Sorting Hat” determines which students will be placed in each of the four houses, i.e. colleges. Each house has an identity that is bound up in the interplay between its attendant faculty and staff and the students who live among them (Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*).

Therefore, this generation, over many others in the past, is primed to allow faculty and staff to plunge in the particulars of students’ lives, through sustained conversation over four years—as in Harry Potter! In a previous article, Mark Ravizza, S.J. and I suggested one place for sustained conversation is the residential learning communities, where students, faculty and staff live and learn together (Ravizza S.J., Mark and Boscia, Chris, “Where You Live and What You Will Do: Teaching Vocational Discernment in Residential Learning Communities,” *Conversations*, Number 27/ Spring 2005.) In light of the dwindling availability of Jesuits for residential ministry, this new generation presents a special opportunity for lay faculty and staff, regardless of age or state in life, to move in to residence halls and engage students in their new “home.”

Required: staying up late at night

The Jesuit “Manner” of Education and Formation

Phenomenological treatises such as *Millennials Rising* and *Virtual Faith* lull readers into the belief that we can truly understand our students by reading *about* their generation instead of *engaging* them. In contrast, the Jesuit tradition of higher education and formation calls us to approach students with great attentiveness and adaptability—even reverence—not to stereotype individuals using trends or statistics. Howard Gray, S.J. describes the component of attentiveness as “allowing another’s reality to become one’s own” (Gray S.J.,

Howard, in the Distinguished Jesuit Lecture Series at the University of San Francisco, October 1998). In other words, when a student tells me that she is confused about her sexuality, I do not jump with my own conclusions or solutions for her life. Rather, I listen and allow her to reveal to me the layers of her experience, however difficult that may be for her or for me.

Another essential component for those who work in Jesuit colleges and universities is the principle of adaptability. In the 18th Annotation to his collection of notes called *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius reminds us that God “adjusts to the reality of each person’s unique temperament and history.” As God so adapts to all people, we must adapt to the unique histories and temperaments of our students. **WARNING:** ADAPTATION TO TODAY’S STUDENTS MAY INVOLVE THE OCCASIONAL LATE NIGHT AND INCREASED REFERENCES TO POP CULTURE! All kidding aside, we must resist the easy temptation to label students as one way or another simply because they follow certain trends of their peers. At its heart, Ignatian adaptability is an openness of spirit that invites all students to reveal themselves to trusted mentors and friends.

One last component of Jesuit education is worth mentioning: solidarity with others. Professor Doris Donnelly of John Carroll University presents two conflicting metaphors of the Christian journey to God, that of the pilgrim and the tourist (Donnelly, Doris “Pilgrims and Tourists: Conflicting Metaphors for the Christian Journey to God,” *Spirituality Today*. 44/Spring 1992). After comparing and contrasting both metaphors, Donnelly preferences the image of pilgrim which implies a “sense of interconnectedness.” The interconnectedness that allows students to have solidarity with their fellow pilgrims (students) will “extend a relationship to the earth and the environment...all forms of life are to be honored and treated with fundamental respect.” Donnelly’s insights remind us that we can only gain this solidarity after the long journey with fellow travelers. Solidarity at the university is not something that can be read about and applied to the world. It must be experienced through the hospitality and challenge of others.

Conclusion

So how do *you* enter into the above-mentioned manner to educate and form your students? Have hope! Resist attempts to stereotype and group students into a generational framework. For example, many an administrator longs for the halcyon days when students attended mass more frequently, did not binge

drink, and did not commit random acts of violence. Longings like these are echoed in a letter from a university administrator to his supervisor:

There is here a large concourse of students...various opinions and errors in matters of faith are prevalent among them.

The divine worship of Catholics is reduced pretty well to the preaching of an uninspired sermon on feast days. All that remains of the Lenten fast here is its name, for nobody fasts. And, oh, how rare it is for a man to visit church, to go to Mass or to show by any outward sign that he still delights in the ancient faith. So much for the Catholics, or, rather, for those who keep the bare title of Catholic.

The government of the University is bringing me a great deal of trouble and mighty little in the way of obvious results. The Rector’s principal duties are to register the names of new students, to compel debtors to pay their dues, to hear the complaints which citizens and women bring against the young men, to arrest, reprimand and imprison undergraduates who get drunk or roam about the town at night, and, finally, to preside at festive gatherings, academic meetings, and functions connected with the conferring of degrees.

The undergraduates, of course, provided the academic court with most of its cases, including the wounding of a clerical student at a dance, an unprovoked and armed attack on some nobles, and habitual absence from lectures.

These are excerpts of a letter from Saint Peter Canisius to Saint Ignatius in Rome, when Peter was the Rector of the Jesuit College at Ingolstadt, Germany, circa 1550 (Brodrick, James S.J. *Saint Peter Canisius*.) We still face similar problems 450 years later. Those halcyon days are a figment of our imagination.

I invite faculty and staff of all ages (religious, married, single, or with families) to move into the residence halls where practicable. Help students integrate the myriad experiences they have in college. Plunge into the particulars of their lives and stand in awe while they grow in self-awareness before your eyes. If your experience is anything like mine, you will express profound gratitude for the opportunity to accompany students as they journey through their four years of college. ■