

10-1-2003

In the First Person: On "Where and With Whom is My Heart"

Susan M. Behuniak

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Behuniak, Susan M. (2003) "In the First Person: On "Where and With Whom is My Heart"," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 24, Article 9.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol24/iss1/9>

On "where and with whom is my heart"

Susan M. Behuniak

It is revealing that those who align themselves with the marginalized, the hated, the oppressed, the suffering, the poor, or the powerless are roundly criticized for identifying with whom their hearts lie, when those who speak for the mainstream and adopt the voice of the powerful, the privileged, the idealized, or the norm do so under the cloak of neutrality, objectivity, and universality. I think that Paulo Freire got it right when he said, "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral." For those of us who name both where we stand and with whom, the academic norm that we have broken is not that of having a point of view but of daring to reveal it.

Admittedly, asking where and with whom is my heart is a political, even a radical question, but it is also a thoroughly academic one. It is radical because it goes to the very root of the purpose of education, that of humanizing us, and it is academic because it questions knowledge itself -- how it is constructed, by whom, for what purposes, and indeed, what counts as knowledge at all. It is a question that critics sometimes blast as the product of "political correctness" but one that has always seemed to me to be inspired by "intellectual correctness" because it pursues the whole truth, the whole story by including voices usually ignored. Perhaps the best example of its effectiveness has been within feminism, where it has been employed to challenge "truths" through personal accounts that document a contrary, a different, or at minimum a parallel universe. In this, it asks the mainstream to cast its gaze out to the margins and to be so moved by what it sees that the truth, and perhaps even the world, is

changed.

For example, when we study the issue of poverty in my American National Politics course, I am often startled by the number of students whose objections to social welfare programs are dismissive of human suffering and impervious to data that show the millions of children who are poor and the mere sliver of the budgetary pie allotted to social welfare as compared to defense or to corporate aid. The numbers, pie charts, and diagrams don't budge them. But I find that a personal story does. I recount standing in a checkout line in a grocery store as an adolescent with my mother, who paid for part of our bill in food stamps. Some people viewed these stamps as licenses to question our food choices, disparage us with stereotypes, and humiliate us with glares. "Assistance" comes with a cost, I tell my students. Then I emphasize that my brief experience with hard times barely skims the surface of what poverty is, how it feels, and what it means, so I ask them to list the things that poverty denies a child, and then we discuss what role, if any, the government should have. Now the analysis -- the struggle with the data, with the people, with values, with political ideologies, with rights and responsibilities -- can take place. It is by standing with the poor and encouraging my students to at least hear their stories that I challenge them to consider whether their stances reflect the whole story or just a privileged version.

Since I research and teach in the field of Constitutional Law, I am well acquainted with the objections to abandoning neutrality. For it is in

Susan M. Behuniak is Professor and Chair of Political Science at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY. behuniak@lemoyne.edu.

the field of law, if anywhere, that there is a consciously articulated effort to suppress the heart in favor of the head, to employ legal reasoning over the pull of personal stories, and to focus on the process while disregarding the result. But just as educating "the mind" can neglect to address the needs of what the Jesuit tradition calls "the whole person," so can legalism fail to speak to the realities of the human condition.

Support for supplementing sterile legalism with personal knowledge came recently from an unexpected source, Justice Clarence Thomas, a conservative jurist who usually sits silent during oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court. But in December 2002 while hearing arguments in *Virginia v. Black*, a case that uses free speech rights to challenge the constitutionality of the state's law against cross-burning, Thomas interrupted Michael R. Dreeben, the attorney representing the Justice Department (who was defending the law), to question whether he was in fact "understating" the effects of a burning cross. Referring to 100 years of lynchings in the South as a "reign of terror" of which the cross was a symbol, Thomas spoke not so much as a judge but as a black man. He chided Dreeben: "I think that what you're attempting to do is to fit this into our jurisprudence rather than stating more clearly what the cross was intended to accomplish, and indeed, that it is unlike any symbol in our society." Here was a moment when abstract legal analysis was asked to come to terms with concrete experience; of how a burning cross is interpreted not as free expression but as a physical threat when you are black. Thomas was arguing that for justice to be done, particularized knowledge must be heard.

This holds true not only for the courtroom, but also for the classroom. Articulating where we stand as teachers is sound pedagogy. How can we insist that students develop "a voice," reveal their values, and make courageous decisions when we

hide our own behind a curtain of feigned neutrality? Indeed, to teach effectively, we must role model what we implore them to become. Yet, let me emphasize, that in revealing where we stand it must be distinguishable, not just in our minds but most especially in the minds of our students, from demanding that they stand where we do. Our revelation must be an invitation to engage in earnest discussion and open reflection, and never a threat nor a requirement to conform. We must remember that academic freedom is not ours alone, just as the obligation of intellectual honesty is not theirs alone.



Photo Courtesy of St. Louis University