

4-1-1997

Half Truths and Whole Persons: Imaginary Conversations

Peter Fennessy, S.J.

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

Recommended Citation

Fennessy, S.J., Peter (1997) "Half Truths and Whole Persons: Imaginary Conversations," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 11, Article 6.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol11/iss1/6>

Half Truths and Whole Persons: Imaginary Conversations

PETER J. FENNESSY, S.J.
JOHN CARROLL UNIVERSITY

Conversation can sometimes degenerate into accusation. Polarities, between spouses, for example, or working pairs like surgeons and nurses, can become antagonistic rather than complementary. The same may happen with professors and student-affairs personnel as they address the education (in the fullest sense of that word) of their students.

Do you really care, [the one might say] that students are suffering? You seem to care only about your discipline, and whether students can function in class, learn the material, pass the test. You focus on the intellectual, the abstract, the objective, the impersonal. But there's more to education than classrooms, more to students than minds. If we are to educate the whole person, to give the *cura personalis* we promise, and respond to the needs of our students, then you have got to do more. You need to take personal interest in them, to be available outside of academics, to attend their social, sports and extracurricular activities. You can't leave this "whole person" stuff to Student Affairs.

Well [a testy professor might reply] that's really your job, isn't it. You were hired to take care of students outside the classroom. You're supposed to be into the emotional and feeling side of things, the concrete, subjective, spiritual, personal. It's your job to eat cookies with them, hold their hands, give them a shoulder to cry on. We already have a full-time job, the intellectual formation of students. That's the primary reason for this institution, the reason students are here in the first place. We don't have time to do your job as well, and we're not paid or recognized for doing it.

There is some truth to both these statements, though it is a half truth at best. Even where faculty,

POLARITIES, BETWEEN
SPOUSES, FOR EXAMPLE,
OR WORKING PAIRS LIKE
SURGEONS AND NURSES,
CAN BECOME
ANTAGONISTIC RATHER
THAN COMPLEMENTARY.

staff, and administration have the education of the whole person as their common goal there still needs to be some division of labor.

That division can be oversimplified. It shouldn't be between purely academic matters with no concern for the personal and care for individuals without concern for their intellectual development. Were we addressing the formation of only one such dimension of our students, we could afford to be one-dimensional ourselves without endangering our purpose.

Our calling is, indeed, to contribute to the growth of our students from our own unique perspectives and within our own specialized areas. But in the process we address the whole person, not just part. And to do this, we need to be whole persons ourselves.

That is no easy undertaking. It implies a certain balance and interplay between predominant elements and functions and secondary ones: between the masculine and feminine, for example, the objective and subjective, or the intellect and emotion. A healthy person acknowledges, values, integrates, and can utilize aspects or functions of the self that are not predominant. That allows us to address students in their totality, whatever the specific nature of our interaction with them. It allows us to collaborate appropriately with colleagues and to carry on with them civil and fruitful conversations about our complementary tasks.

In the conversation caricatured above, the speakers exaggerate the disjunction between two aspects of their jobs and students. They stereotype themselves and their conversational partner. They identify too much with one side of the dichotomy and show themselves hostile toward the other side in themselves, their colleagues, and eventually in their students as well.

I'm in my field [the professor ought to say] because it provides a vision of truth and beauty. It's interesting and important, valuable to the world, rewarding to me, enjoyable, meaningful. I'm in education to share that vision and interest with students, to help them come alive to the intellectual life and to some aspect of our world, to challenge them to find something they can give themselves to in my field or any other. And I don't and can't do that in the abstract. I need to appeal, however implicitly, to their emotions and feelings, their aspirations and hopes, their experiences and ideals, their desires for a richer and better life. I push them however I can toward growth in dedication, discipline, and dependability, in commitment, creativeness and

character, without all of which their intellectual and personal lives would both be a shambles. As often as not that forces to the surface personal problems that make themselves more than obvious in classroom responses, papers, and private talks in my office. I deal with a lot of those problems out of my personal experience. But when they need more than I can give, I am grateful there are professionals like yourself available, who can provide precisely the services and counseling they need and to whom I can confidently refer them. I would not expect myself to do your kind of work any more than I would expect you to teach a course in a specialized academic area.

Well, thanks for your confidence [the student-affairs person might respond]. In fact, I have spent quite a while getting my professional degree and keeping up to date with personal study, workshops, and conferences; quite a while too recruiting as competent a staff as our budget will allow and developing the staff already here. I got into this area because I care very deeply for our students, but mere feeling is not enough. Unless our good desires are well informed, competent, disciplined and include a healthy strain of detachment and objectivity, our students will not be well served. Sentimentalism will replace effective care, decisions may be unfair or incorrect, and I and my staff will soon burn out and be of use to no one. I am in an institution of higher education, not by accident, but because I value the academic formation of these young people that is done here. I help students not just for the sake of helping them, but to help them toward a goal, and right now in their lives that goal is principally intellectual growth. I presume you teach them not just knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge that will mean better lives for them and others. For each of us Jesuit education involves heart and head, knowledge and personal concern, not you with one and I with the other, but each of us with both.