

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 7

Article 4

4-1-1995

Student Writing: A "Nice Guy"

Kevin Barry

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

Recommended Citation

Barry, Kevin (1995) "Student Writing: A "Nice Guy"," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 7, Article 4.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol7/iss1/4>

restraint as the highest human goods. The liberal paradigm augments this slightly with statements such as "I cannot be free until all are free," or "I am happiest when I'm helping others," statements that seldom sound very convincing, at least to me.

A Topography of Paradigms of Love

It is more difficult, I think, to characterize our students as adhering to one or the other of two alternative and competing paradigms of love. Instead, I find it helpful to think in terms of a kind of topography of these paradigms. There is considerable overlap across this landscape of paradigms, with one and the same student committed to two or more paradigms that are not particularly commensurable with one another, though students for a time seem largely innocent of this fact.

One index to the lines of demarcation among these paradigms is the way that a student will use the word "love." The vast majority restricts this word to romantic and domestic contexts—love of boyfriend or girlfriend, spouse, children, immediate relatives. Naturally enough, the exemplars that give substance and meaning to the term are members of their own families. Usually, however, certain figures from literature, cinema, and the arts also provide exemplars that fill out their paradigm of love. Within this paradigm the instrumentation is domestic mutuality of affection and indeed of passion, as well as reciprocity of self-sacrificial deeds.

Moreover, domesticity—in the sense of a fairly high level of economic prosperity—is considered indispensable to this vision of love. On the whole, students holding this paradigm tend to be much more convinced of the importance of income to a successful loving relationship (e.g., living together) than they are about the bonds of holy matrimony.

For some students the proper use of the term "love" ends here, and it would be at least anomalous, if not almost immoral to them, to consider love as something taking place outside the immediate context of domesticity. Many other students, however, subscribe at least in practice to additional paradigms of love, although most of them are still uncomfortable with actually using the word "love" in these extended senses. For these students as well, the domestic paradigm remains paramount.

The most common additional paradigm of love has to do with "being nice" to people. It is the closest most students come (initially, at least) to the type of love associated with patriotism in its noblest sense—love of one's fellow citizens. In this paradigm citizen-love reduces to tolerance—the non-judgmental acceptance of those who are "different" from oneself. The problems of loving crying out most urgently for solution within the purview of this paradigm are problems of how to get more people to be more accepting of others. This paradigm's exemplars are usually certain peers and teachers—and here exemplars who are not "nice" are just as illuminating as those who are. Because of the importance attached to being non-judgmental, however, the mutuality and reciprocity characteristic of domestic love are not part of the instrumentation of this paradigm. Tolerance is a kind of "live and let live" paradigm,

STUDENT WRITING

A "Nice Guy"

Kevin Barry

A few days ago, I was telling my Dad about my tutoring a man named Chuck in the parts of speech. Chuck is a very eager and hardworking man who practically begs me for more homework to complete in his cell, and who tells me that he survives each day by having "faith in the Lord." I told my father that Chuck was "a really nice guy" and my Dad corrected me, noting that Chuck was in jail. I believe that my father was right but maybe the difference lies in what we define as "nice." Perhaps being "nice" is the ability to show one's desire to be in harmony with oneself and one's environment through external actions, and can therefore be defined as acting in a way conducive to one's best interests. Therefore, when one is described as being "nice" it can be said that he is acting justly and in accordance with the positive good—his proper function, thus reflecting one's desire to achieve excellence and to be the best person one can be.

When one commits an act of injustice, as did Chuck, he is acting

in a way contrary to his proper function and desire for excellence and so can no longer be called "nice." However, when one becomes reformed through just punishment and is made just, therefore realigning himself with his desire for selfhood and excellence, is it not also true that in the process he may be able to exhibit "nice" behavior once again?

I believe that Chuck is a "nice guy" because I believe that he has begun to rediscover what truly is best for himself and what is conducive to making his life one that serves his best interests. This is not to say that Chuck is reformed, however, for reform comes when one knows that his proper function is a life aimed at excellence, and therefore seeks to live in accordance with this idea. I think that Chuck had a good idea about his achieving excellence in life—in his concern for his work, his regard for others, and in his faith in God. However, it will take a further understanding of the highest good that is excellence and a commitment to what he knows is in line with his best interests in order to constitute a total reform.