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Of Love and Distraction

Words from One Jesuit Campus Respond to Hatred at Its Gates

By Brian Norman

In early April, the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) announced plans to protest my campus. They cited as a particular offense the student LGBTQ and allies group Spectrum and its faculty/staff corollary OUTLoyola, two groups with whom I have worked closely and proudly over the years.

Word quickly spread through social and informal media. Students were upset and confused. For those who had encountered such groups before, there was less alarm and more disquiet. An ensuing campus

communication underscored our commitment to inclusion and Jesuit values, while asking members not to inadvertently spread WBC's message on social media in the act of disavowing it. The protestors, we were assured, would not be allowed on campus and would – if they appeared at all – be small in number and likely stand astride a public street corner just outside our perimeter for the 30 threatened minutes at mid-day.

Hatred was at our gates. A campus and student generation that believes fiercely in inclusion was compelled to reflect on an appropriate response. At that same mid-day hour, students worked with faculty and staff to hold a gathering on our campus quad to display unity and love. There were speakers, prayers, and an opportunity to sign a pledge board, a staple of campus demonstrations in recent years. The mood was festive; the sun was bright; the message was love.

Such a gesture is of course welcome, especially for sexual minority members of the community, including myself. But I also worried that day about necessary internal work and critical reflection in our own community, which isn't always possible in the tenor of unity. What difficult conversation were we *not* having that day, I wondered?

I was honored to be asked to share a few words that day, and I shall share them here, too:

"I've faced down bigots before. As a college student joining feminist demonstrations. Or, as a young professor in Idaho joining the unsuccessful fight against an anti-gay state constitutional amendment."

"That's the easy stuff. That's the stuff of moral clarity and heady feelings of righteousness. Today, we have much harder work to do."

"Today, we must also look *inward* to our own community. Yes, we must mark the presence of obvious bigotry, like those standing on Charles Street with a message of hatred. That is important to mark. But we cannot let that be a distraction from work to be done *here*, within our own community. We must dim the lights of obvious, spectacular hatred so that we can see more intimate injustices here at home, lest we prematurely celebrate unity before asking if we've achieved it."

“Do I always feel included here at Loyola? Sometimes, yes. Like today. Today, we are intentionally coming together and remembering our highest ideals. This is mission in action.”

“But sometimes, no. Such as when I ask whether my husband is invited to an event. I can’t be certain; that nagging insecurity points to something. Or, when I encounter an anti-gay slur scrawled on a restroom wall or uttered casually by passing students in conversation. Or, when I feel the professional need to take extra care when discussing LGBTQ literature in a course to help students see how such intellectual engagement with the world is not only consistent with our values, but even perhaps called for by that educational mission. Or, when I joined with colleagues – many in the audience today – to secure access to healthcare for legally domiciled adults. Or, when I joined again with colleagues to work for 12 months to secure gender-inclusive restroom signs so that our campus is more welcoming of transgender individuals. That work continues.”

“So, today let’s turn inward to ask not just ourselves but also our neighbors if they feel welcome. If they experience inclusion in their everyday lives here at Loyola. Inclusion is our institutional policy and it is part of the Ignatian call to affirm human dignity, but

what does that look like in our everyday lives? Let’s not prematurely celebrate unity. Let’s work together to achieve it.

“As black feminist Pat Parker said in 1980: Revolution is not neat or pretty or quick. Today, we are living in a revolution begun generations ago. Let’s resolve to learn about who we have to thank for this world today. And how to continue their work.”

Later, at a reflection session in the campus ministry lounge, the director reminded us that the WBC rose to prominence by protesting the funeral of Matthew Shepherd following his brutal anti-gay murder in Wyoming. At the trials the following year, counterdemonstrators constructed giant angel wings to block the perimeter. It was an act of astonishing creativity and care as they created a space of grief and dignity for the family of the slain son.

What is the equivalent today at a Jesuit university seeking to engage a diverse world? What kind of intellectual community can we build now that has the capacity to imagine such beautiful acts of defiance later, when they are necessary? And what kind of grief and community work within our own perimeters must we make space for? I do not know the answers. But I know some of the questions.

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Modeling Dialogue

Honest, Authentic Encounters

By Paul K. Alexander

Jesuit Catholic universities are uniquely poised to lead our communities and our world in transformational dialogue. The values and fundamental teachings within our Ignatian way of proceeding and Catholic social thought can build honest and authentic encounters with others.

Father Michael Sheeran, S.J., former president of Regis University and current president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities drew from these

core principles when he founded the Institute on the Common Good in 1997. We begin with Ignatius’ admonition to believe in the “right intention” of every human being. If the world is fundamentally good, then we must trust that every human acts from a place of good. We do not seek to beat down but rather raise up what is sacred in the other’s position, interest, or belief. We ask “what is the guiding good here?” We insist on participation and subsidiarity. The members of a com-