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Holding the Creative Tension with Beloved Balance

By Raymond Reyes

Living in the Pacific Northwest, where we have four distinct seasons, I find great comfort in the two transition moments in our annual round, fall and spring. They offer balance to the extremes of the deep freeze of winter and the hot sizzle of summer. As I write in early September, I find great comfort knowing that the autumnal equinox is two weeks away and on the other side of winter six months away resides the spring equinox.

In both instances, this cosmic dance co-creates equal light and dark, the perfect balance of 12 hours of day and night. The Jesuit worldview tells us that reality is saturated with the active presence of God and that he reveals his face to us in the creative tension of living. So how can we transform Jesuit rhetoric into reality through the balanced productive discomfort of diverse, opposing, and conflicting perspectives of reality?

Nine years ago, before it became a common practice or a Title IX requirement to do so, Gonzaga University began assessing its campus climate to evaluate the organizational health and wellness of inclusion, equity, and intercultural relations. Over the years of these assessments, I have asked the question, what is the GU

experience if you are not white, middle-class, heterosexual, male, Christian, able bodied, and American born? The symptoms of the growing concerns of secularization of higher education and the decreasing numbers of Jesuits active in leadership and teaching positions emerged in the responses as some community members described Gonzaga University as being not Catholic enough while other community members reported it being too Catholic.

The following recitals offer representative examples and insight into this creative tension.

Not Catholic Enough

- “Conservative and traditional Roman Catholics are encouraged to keep quiet and not participate in a diverse campus.”
- “Openness and acceptance is a valuable and important part of the college experience. However, I came to a Jesuit, Catholic school to be part of a religious community that values the Catholic Church and the ideals that go along with that. But I have been told to silence my beliefs so others don’t feel left out,

rather than invited to share my faith. This has been a huge disappointment. And I wanted more from the Jesuits.”

Too Catholic

- “I feel as though Jesuit aspects are forced on me as a student and that if I don’t participate in Jesuit aspects, I am a lesser person. As a Gonzaga student, I am encouraged to appreciate the uniqueness of others’ ideas only as they are Jesuit, Catholic ideas.”
- “I think GU (administrators) need to walk the talk and not just talk the talk as far as acceptance and diversity goes. They say we’re diverse and accepting, but I believe they are more afraid of going too far or upsetting conservative people than really going beyond their typical comfort zone. Having a Jesuit education is more than being “the perfect Catholic,” and GU needs to open its eyes and see that the world is changing. The administration is way out of touch with the campus and its students.”

Author Parker Palmer enchants us with the notion that truth is a verb, a relationship. Palmer eloquently introduces “troth” (as in betrothed) as a living pledge, a sacramental beholder wherein we learn how to live in integrity, that is, “linking the transcendent character of soul with our human character.” I suppose this is another way of describing the Incarnation or what it means to be Christ-like, to be Christian, not too much or not enough but like autumn or spring equinox, holding the creative tension with beloved balance.

In his book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, Palmer identifies five habits of the heart that may inform a way of proceeding that graces us with the courage to hold diverse, opposing perspectives in orbit without any collisions. The five habits of heart articulated by Palmer are:

- **We must understand that we are all in this together.** It is imperative to realize that we are dependent on and accountable to one another. Tribal people express this belief with the mantra “we are all related.” The principle of interdependence and the practice of what happens to one happens to everyone can strengthen our capacity to contribute to the *magis*. What does this mean in a Jesuit context?
- **We must develop an appreciation of the value of “otherness.”** For me this refers to what I call sacred hospitality. Kent Hoffman, a psychologist in Spokane, refers to sacred to mean “shared vulnerability.”

And hospitality is an ancient tradition across time and cultures; a stranger represents potential for being one of our master teachers. Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt therapy, once described the value of the other with his awareness that “through the face of another I am.” Sacred hospitality is how we hold the other in our shared vulnerability. What does this mean in a Jesuit context?

- **We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.** The genius of self-awareness or the merit of maintaining a high emotional IQ resides in the capacity to utilize tensions fully in order to generate insight, energy, and new perspectives. Albert Einstein was known to have pointed out that a problem or challenge can’t be solved on the same level at which it was created. Creative tension is western yoga in terms of how it stretches us and teaches us to expand the breath of life into unexamined areas of our personhood and animate the bandwidth of our being. What does this mean in a Jesuit context?
- **We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency.** In my 29 years of employment as a professor and administrator at a Jesuit university, I have learned that a primary purpose of education is to find your voice and express that narrative voice in a unique way for the greater glory of God. A sense of common unity, community, is negotiated and can morph into consensus reality when I express my version of

truth while checking, amending, or editing that version against the truth of others. What does this mean in a Jesuit context?

- **We must strengthen our capacity to create community.** Sheryl Erickson in *The Power of Collective Wisdom* reminds us that democracy comes from the power to listen to each other, to listen each other into a new being, a collective being that is as conscious of the wholeness as of its difference. For me to create community is contingent upon listening. To remind myself of this essential quality, I have a 14-year-old cat named Listen. My cat reminds me of the Quaker saying, “to listen a soul into disclosure and discovery is the greatest service one human being can offer another.” What does this mean in a Jesuit context?

Palmer’s five habits of the heart transform my imagination and empower a sense of the common good to discover and develop the promised land of the common ground between the tennis match movements of not Catholic enough versus too Catholic within our university community experience. High-octane courage fueled by agape love is critical to balance: the not enough and the too much of being Catholic. Such love and courage will emerge from our silence, listening, and sharing, the entelechy of having conversations. In the spirit of the Jesuits and their lay companions, “May the Blessings Be!”

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