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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Where Is It Today?

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By Robert Deahl

The Tradition is Alive and Well in our College for Adult Learners!

I have had the privilege of being involved in a number of highly productive and challenging “conversations” over the past fifteen years in my role as dean, administrator and faculty member at Marquette University. Working with students, faculty, alumni, leaders in the community and people from a wide variety of industries and disciplines, we have created an educational environment that invites adult students to embark on a journey of self-identification and self-appropriation. The liberal arts courses that are at the core of our curriculum provide the context in which students can explore who they are in relation to their world.

Many of our adult students initially balk at the notion of having to take theology and philosophy courses and ask us how this or that course could possibly be helpful or relevant to their job or profession. I am often asked to

write a letter to the student's employer explaining how a theology or philosophy course will benefit their employee's personal life and professional career; and how their company can justify providing employee reimbursement for taking such a course. I welcome these requests and have tried to carefully articulate the value – and even the return on investment – that our liberal arts courses, such as theology and philosophy, will have for the employer and their student.

After a year or two of taking their liberal arts courses, we can see that students begin to make critical connections between the content of these courses and their own personal and professional lives. Our staff and faculty hear time and time again how these courses that our students once viewed as unnecessary or irrelevant, are the most important courses that they have taken and, in many cases, have changed lives in ways that have truly been transformative and liberating.

We often see that our adult students' world views are broadened, their sense of self deepened, their understanding of the world and their place in it challenged in ways that motivate them to make significant changes

to bring their personal and professional lives more in alignment with their newfound meaning and values. The Catholic intellectual tradition that Richard Liddy so eloquently addressed in the Fall issue of *Conversations* on “Jesuit Schools and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition” is alive and well!

My colleagues and I have seen scores of our adult students change and move away from a more hardened, biased, literal, fundamentalist way of thinking and judging and acting to a much more complex, nuanced, considered approach to the world around them. We see our students moving toward higher – indeed, wider – viewpoints – a largeness, and largesse of understanding. This comes through in how they begin to speak differently about their lives, in the complex questions that they pose, and in the way that they express their hopes and aspirations.

This overall – potentially transformative – educational experience in our college has

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A “feel” for the world

been the “symbolic operator” to use Bernard Lonergan’s term – the trigger – that activates the transcendental precepts that Lonergan speaks of – be attentive; be intelligent; be reasonable; be responsible – as alive and engaged in our students’ lives. This is an educational experience that tries to focus on the student’s capacity for self-transcendence, morally, intellectually, and religiously, inviting, prompting, and challenging our students to embrace the world in a more holistic, attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible and inclusive way. In very real ways, students begin to undergo an intellectual conversion in Lonergan’s sense and begin to see their own personal, self-appropriation as an essential part of their lifelong learning.

Indeed, how do we create – and sustain – this kind of culture among our students, our faculty, throughout our community and build across our divisions toward the wholeness that we desire?

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n the heath Lear asks Gloucester, “How do you see the world?” And Gloucester, who is blind, answers, “I see it feelingly.” I hold a strong belief based the experiences that I have had in our

College of Professional Studies that our liberal arts tradition helps us see the future “feelingly,” and can fire and inspire our moral imagination in ways that lead us out of the confines of a world too narrow, too immediate, too literal, too restricted and into something more.

It is a tradition that stands on the depth of history and embraces a breadth of meaning and value in a way that at once honors pluralism and difference while calling forth our human capacity for wholeness. I believe it is a tradition that can reach across boundaries and, while committed to the education of the whole person, can bring together the multiplicity of disciplines in ways that allow us to see that we are more authentic when we are together than when we are fragmented and apart. It is a tradition that is alive and well today, pushing us further and striving toward wholeness. ■



Students at Loyola University Chicago.