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For Openers: Dangerous Work

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Dangerous Work

BRENNAN O'DONNELL
Editor

Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Lame Shall Enter First" ends with a devastating realization on the part of the ironically named Sheppard, a psychologist with a zeal for reforming troubled boys, that his efforts to "save" a particularly hardened boy have led him with disastrous consequences to neglect his own son and his own soul. "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton," writes O'Connor. In this moment of radical failure, O'Connor suggests, the misdirected doer of "good works" understands that what seems to be a call to service can sometimes be a killing temptation to neglect the hard work of coming to genuine self knowledge and to knowledge of God. It is a story that reminds one of how fraught with danger efforts at integrating academics and service to the community may be, both for students and for their teachers.

Pat Byrne's twenty-five years of experience in Boston College's PULSE Program have given him a profound respect for these dangers, as well as an admirable sense of the pedagogic uses of the uneasy alliance of classroom and service experience. In "Paradigms of Justice and Love" he offers a fascinating look, part analysis and part testimonial, at the many ways in which PULSE students and professors struggle to understand and to resist the temptations of insufficiently inclusive and seriously constricting notions of justice and love. He offers a compelling case that a program integrating theoretical discussion of ideas with face-to-face encounters with human beings in need can compel students and teachers alike to challenge and eventually to break through the "desperately shallow" paradigms in which we can so frequently remain cozily nestled, our protestations of concern notwithstanding.

As the metaphors "struggle" and "breaking through" suggest, the work of service learning as it is described by Byrne is potentially agonizing. This kind of teaching seeks to do intellectual violence to the student's old views, to produce a radical change that Byrne describes as nothing less than a "conversion." Published by e-Publications@Marquette 1995. It is becoming a kind of

vogue it may be particularly important to listen carefully to this note in Byrne's essay. When this kind of work is well done, he says, it transforms everyone involved in ways that are beyond reckoning in advance. Byrne offers much needed help for this daunting task by showing us clearly where we begin.

We received a good deal of favorable response to the format of last issue, in which we asked a number of respondents to provide direct commentaries on specific points touched upon in the issue's main article. Heeding the old proverb, we're not going to fix and fidget with a good thing. We have, however, cut back on the number of responses in order to provide room for some excerpts from the journals of PULSE Program students. We are grateful to these students—Kevin Barry, Kerry Dolan, and Christine Pepe—for allowing us to publish their work. We hope that you find this issue of *Conversations* useful, and we invite you (as always) to let us know—by mail, phone, fax or e-mail—what you think.

In October, on the very day that the National Seminar convened at Regis University to make final decisions about the content of this issue of *Conversations*, the campus community received word of the sudden death of Fr. Vincent O'Flaherty, S.J. Fr. O'Flaherty, former rector of the Regis Jesuit community (1984-91), was the project director of Romero House, one of Regis's most innovative service learning initiatives. He died in his sleep on Thursday, October 13, at the age of 72. At our meeting with Regis faculty, administrators and staff on Friday the 14th, Fr. O'Flaherty was very much present in the room, as colleague after colleague spoke of his loving dedication to the Society of Jesus, to Regis, and especially to Romero House and its student workers. (Romero House is described within, in the Regis portion of the "In Deed" section.) Members of the National Seminar wish to dedicate this service learning issue to Fr. Vincent O'Flaherty, S.J. (1922-1994). 1