

September 2014

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Recommended Citation

Peterson-Iyer, Karen (2014) "Finding God in All Things: Sex, Relationships, and Jesuit Identity," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 46, Article 14.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol46/iss1/14>

Finding God in All Things

Sex, Relationships, and Jesuit Identity

By Karen Peterson-Iyer

Fostering an openness to transcendence is one of the graces of teaching in a Jesuit university. We help our students to know God better by helping them to engage more deeply in the world. And extending this openness across the span of student experience – from the classroom to the retreat center, into the student cafeterias and residence halls – stands as both an invitation and a challenge.

Many of our students will never darken the door of a campus ministry office or have a confessional conversation with a priest. Yet, these very same students carry hopes, dreams, fears, and pain that can ultimately provide them deep wisdom and insight. We affirm that God has the capacity to speak to each of these students; it is our challenge to find ways, even within the classroom, to foster this. Jesuit campuses routinely invite students to encounter God at mass, at campus ministry, and on retreats. The bolstering of service learning, immersion trips, and other forms of community engagement present similarly effective opportunities to engage students spiritually. But we also should not overlook the opportunities that exist in ordinary classroom encounters for extending mission identity – in which we can encourage our students to examine their lives, concerns, and relationships for moral wisdom and for deeper clues about the divine. Indeed, shrinking attendance in churches necessitates that we find new places where we can invite our students to “dig deep.”

Further, an Ignatian emphasis on the *daily*ness of faith – that moral discernment is not just about life’s big decisions but rather involves hundreds of quotidian choices – finds important purchase in the classroom. When our stu-

dents are invited to reflect on the moral meaning of their daily actions – about what they do on a Friday night, or where they buy their clothing, or what they ask of a boyfriend or a girlfriend – they are in fact being summoned into a deeper relationship with God. Students’ extracurricular lives thus become sources of moral wisdom, rather than purely cradles of moral challenge.

The value of this effort to bridge curricular and extracurricular occasions for discernment has become abundantly clear in my teaching at Santa Clara University. In particular, my course entitled “Theology, Sex, and Relationships” includes numerous opportunities for students to draw not just on standard sources of wisdom (church doctrine, for example, or biblical guidance) but also on the wisdom gleaned from examining their experience – and being honest about what they encounter there. These various sources of wisdom in fact work together to help students seek after and articulate deeper truth as they understand it. In other words, in conjunction with customary ethical sources – biblical, traditional, or scientific and



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Photos courtesy of Santa Clara University.

sociological sources – students who take seriously their own and others' experience are better able to engage, personalize, and make relevant to their lives the wisdom found in these more conventional corners.

In matters of sexuality, part of the challenge is to address the “whole person.” Jesuit mission affirms that excellence of the mind can best be achieved in tandem with caring for – and honoring – the human heart and spirit. So many students today experience a dramatic disconnect in this regard: they have been taught that moral wisdom about their sexual lives is to be found primarily outside of themselves and has little to do with their experience. Some believe that “right” sexual behavior is simply a matter of doing what the church says to do (or, more commonly, not doing what the church says not to do). Others, those who reject church teachings or who never internalized them in the first place, commonly find themselves adrift in the “hookup culture” that is now prevalent on our college campuses. Classrooms offer these students the chance both to take their experience seriously as a source of wisdom and to identify sexual values that stand as alternatives to those embodied in this “anything goes, as long as it is consensual” atmosphere.

To help students access and articulate these more personal sources of knowledge, one of my assignments – I am indebted colleague Jennifer Beste for this idea – is to have students write anonymous papers describing and interpreting their sexual experiences. This allows them, often for the first time ever in their lives, to take seriously their histories in such a way as to unlock their own interior wisdom. Telling their stories has proven powerful: students have articulated the pain of sexual assault; or the mixed emotions they experience about remaining abstinent; or the joy of being loved unconditionally. I have read anonymous letters to rapists and shame-faced confessions about reckless hooking up. Every single time I read these papers, I am struck by the recognition that the mere act of identifying such barefaced personal realities is a sacred act, an act that

begins the courageous road to healing and transformation. Paul Crowley's words in the pages of *Conversations* over a decade ago ring true: “In the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, transcendence is directly tied to a full-throttle encounter with the reality of life as it is, because this is the only authentic path to promise and hope.”

Another assignment I give my students – also borrowed from a colleague, Kerry Cronin – is similarly nontraditional: each must arrange and go on a date. I then ask them to reflect in writing on that experience and on the values that undergird it, as compared to the values that govern campus hookup culture. Many students are fearful and anxious at first; they view dating as obsolete and bizarre. In reading their reflections, however, I am routinely struck by the eventual relief that the experience typically unleashes, as students ascertain alternatives to hooking up. Here, instead of turning to “experts” about what constitutes life-giving relational encounters, students are invited to use their own experiences as a guide to deeper understanding.

Finally, I would like to highlight the opportunity to encounter each other's suffering in a classroom setting. In last fall's issue of *Conversations*, Margaret Farley held that a Jesuit education invites students to share in the world's sufferings, to “drink the cup” that both embodies the injustices of the world and points the way forward to transformation. Arguably, to do this not only entails educating our students about the sufferings of the world; it also entails asking and equipping them genuinely to encounter each other in the complex reality of their diverse experiences. Many of our students carry immense pain related to their sexuality – pain that is, in part, relieved by the effort to articulate it and the chance to learn that they are not alone in their experiences. While the classroom isn't a therapy session, it can provide marvelous opportunities to reflect together on the numbing effect of hookup sex or the straightjacketing influence of pop culture's gendered expectations. In the relatively rare cases where deeper expertise is called for, connecting students with on-campus mental health resources is a ready option; but more often, student simply need, and find immensely valuable, the invitation to reflect on their own individual and collective experiences – including the painful ones – as meaningful. Because suffering, to use Farley's words, “cries out for change,” the classroom itself thus becomes a genuine tool for change in the world, ultimately moving our students towards a more profound encounter with the divine. And that is indeed a grace unparalleled. ■