
Daniel W. Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation
The Stone Thrown into the Pond

Donald S. Kirby, S.J., Compass for Uncharted Lives: A Model for Values Education.

By Daniel W. Murphy

Everyone knows that when a stone falls into a pond, a ripple effect results. But what lies beneath the ripple? And what happens to the stone?

The recurrent image of the ripple effect in Compass for Uncharted Lives: A Model for Values Education solidifies the book’s ultimate message: values education in the university can help to restore moral life universally. Or in other worlds, developing a grassroots, campus-wide framework for values education can reach so far as to teach us all—student, professor, administrator, justice, and global citizen—how to deepen our moral consciousness and become better people.

Donald J. Kirby, S.J., the author of Compass, is also a professor of religious studies at Le Moyne College and former director of Le Moyne’s Center for the Advancement of Values Education (CAVE). As Compass attests, he is as much a gifted communicator of the meaning of values education in the university as he is a master practitioner of the art of teaching values in the 21st century. And what an art to practice in an age as dualistic-jointed as ours, an age in which a ratcheted-up embrace of “difference” in values education has fallen in lockstep with a burgeoning, countermodern, widespread moral indifference.

Kirby knows that for decades, this strange, cross-culturally pervasive acceptance of both difference and indifference has all too often rendered students to life on a “hard and barren” moral landscape, a terrain which all too often presents itself as the only path between moral indiscernibility and crass relativism. At Le Moyne College in the mid-1980s, he began to tackle the problem by organizing a handful of faculty members to discuss how to guide students in relating their Jesuit liberal arts education to their major field of study.

This grassroots, faculty-based group cautiously yet optimistically attempted to catalyze the discussion and development of “values education in the university.” As Kirby relates through the ripple image, the very idea of values education in the university was the previous stone, thrown directly into the life of the Le Moyne campus community. This was the pond itself, a liquid body filled with all the ideals, concerns, passions, imperfections, and anxieties of every one of the members of the Le Moyne community.

The core participants in CAVE’s values program nurtured their passion, intellectual interests, attention to detail, and long-term vision in a way that catalyzed the vast majority of the Le Moyne community. From the impulse initiated by CAVE, the ripple of genuine interest in values education spread farther and deeper, gathering more and more participants and contributors. Compass effectively shows the complex evolution of CAVE from this early phase toward its peak of development in the late 1990s, and which continued in its three main elements: its Working Group on Values, its Values Institute, and its Academic Forum.
Guide students on how to relate their Jesuit education to their major.

These three legs of CAVE combined day-to-day administration with diverse inputs and perspectives, flexibility, and above all, a spontaneity and openness of reflection and moral activism that continually refreshed and re-energized the CAVE program. A short yet particularly remarkable event, a simulated late-night Le Moyne "student dorm report" session on values, expectations, and college life, serves as wonderful evidence as to how the three legs of the CAVE model can work in concert to raise moral consciousness throughout the campus.

As Kirby relates throughout Compass, only with this kind of grassroots authenticity could the '90s fledgling version of CAVE, with a budget of just a few thousand dollars, a handful of core participants, and a minimal presence on campus, have grown into its peak form in the late 1990s as the "signature program" of Le Moyne College. CAVE enjoyed a million-dollar endowment, national commendation from the Middle States Accreditation Board, and status as an international model for values education in the university. The ripples of energy and accomplishment in values education thus remained not only the private affair of Le Moyne, but became two and three-dimensional, so to speak, as they spread to inform and influence similar efforts both nationally and internationally.

If Compass clarifies all of these aspects of the CAVE model, then what still remains is to explore the questions we opened with above. Namely, what lies beneath the ripples? And what happens to the stone? The answer to both these questions centrally involves the basic attitudes of all members of any campus community. To get to the bottom of this answer we might ask the additional question: Do all of us on campus care about the issue of values education? Also, we already know the answer: the majority reply "yes," the dissent "no," and the agnostics, "neither." So really, we should ask a further question: Do all of us on campus want to care about the issues of values education?

Kirby seeks, our answer to this last question puts our basic attitudes in much, clearer, stronger relief. A strong, collective "yes" to this question means the stone can always be re-discovered at the bottom of the pond floor, brought to the surface again, and restored within our vision, contemplation, discussion, and action - if we just make the effort to dive deeply enough in the first place. But what if the response is largely negative? Then what lies beneath the ripples is not a fundamental attitude affirming the importance of reclaiming values education for the university, but an attitude more akin to the muddy, lifeless underbelly of some ponds. Like these murky bottoms, this negative education washes up the metaphorical stone - the significance of values education - and makes it vanish completely.

Like many of us, Kirby is aware of the pitfalls of this midterm, discouraging scenario. It is quite difficult to remain enthusiastic about values education on campus if the method and content of this kind of education is mostly defined and dominated by a fixed syllabus, core curricula requirement driven by a select minority of upper-level administration, or by a small cohort of senior faculty members, or perhaps even by the leadership of the marketing department involved with 'branding' the college.

To be sure, as Kirby describes, there are benefits to these kinds of core curriculum and learning community programs, as there are to service learning initiatives and other kinds of programs in values education which have a presence in higher education. Yet in this acknowledgment, he also points out limitations of these kinds of programs: they typically involve participation by only part of the campus community, and not all of it; they are typically top-down and not grassroots programs; and unfortunately, they can often backfire and foster a flagging moral relativism and sense of deception.

What Kirby wanted, and what he is confident that the CAVE program ultimately provided over its years of development, was an

Programs like this can often backfire.
What lies beneath the ripples, and what happens to the stone?

Organic, campus-wide atmosphere of values education that unified the academic level of structure and leadership with the livelihood of individual passion and creativity. What he wants now is for us to see how various versions of the CWS model continue to thrive elsewhere in the world, including Dutch institutions like Fontys University and the University of Tilburg. And what might he want in the future? I think Kirby brings this into sharper focus as he closes Gospels with a clear and wise request: "Won’t you?"

Kirby asks, “take the tools and techniques we describe in this book and use them to make a difference in your college, your university, your business, your world”.

Daniel W. Murphy is a member of the department of philosophy at Saint Peter’s College.

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

In November Seattle University hosted the Opus Prize, one of the world’s largest faith-based humanitarian awards. The 2008 recipients—Maggie Barakinte of Burundi, Africa, Michael Woodard of Nicaragua and Kishnammal Jagannathan of India shared their profound stories with the campus community during Mission Day.