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Against Manufactured Truth

Fostering Respect for a Complex and Ambiguous Reality

By Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar

I frequently teach social ethics and theories of justice. In my first years of teaching, I aspired to show all sides of an ethical or policy issue, not revealing my own views. Today, however, it is less and less possible to maintain neutrality. Coverage of “both sides” of an issue slips, more often than not, into indulging alternate, manufactured realities. Journalists have had to learn that balance does not mean giving equal time to blatantly false perspectives. Academics can’t be pulled into this either.

For example, I teach about the justice implications of climate change. While most of my students accept the reality of human-generated climate change, I have had some climate change deniers. They are often armed with arguments generated and disseminated by the same folks who got paid to convince us that smoking does not damage health. Sometimes it is difficult to know how to include these students in the conversation, while preventing the classroom from becoming a venue for data that has been created to present a false view of reality.

In navigating these situations, I am grateful to be located within a moral and theological tradition that affirms the existence of objective moral truth and yet acknowledges the difficulty of fully grasping all aspects of that truth. Thomas Aquinas famously noted that it becomes harder to discern what is

the good and just thing to do “the more we descend to matters of detail.” Issues of social justice are nothing if not complex and detailed. Yet the fact that we cannot grasp truth in certainty and full detail does not mean that we cannot get better and worse approximations. Sometimes, students seem to feel that they must choose between claiming a grasp of clear and unequivocal truths, or claiming that nothing is objectively true. Such a choice does not equip us to resist manufactured realities. The Catholic intellectual tradition provides a helpful alternative, but grasping this alternative can take long and hard work.

The university is a privileged place in which to delve into complexity and ambiguity and to develop increasing clarity of vision and respect for reality. We are not on a news cycle; we usually have the benefit of time, of intensive access to students over several years, with which to inculcate tools for honoring and discerning truth. We can show students how to assess truth claims, how to question statistics. We can teach them how to read carefully, with nuance, spotting logical fallacies, noting sources. We can teach them how to circumscribe their own claims, to avoid broad generalizations, to appreciate the fine-grained, conditioned nature of our knowledge. We have the leverage of grades, which students often care about

even when they do not think they care about critical thinking.

Obtaining the best possible grasp on the truth in complex matters of social ethics does not eliminate politics or debate. Rather, obtaining the best possible purchase on the truth in policy matters allows true political debate to begin. After all, social ethics is about how to do the best we can in a broken situation. There is no obvious, perfect solution to all our social challenges. There is always a balancing of goods, prudential judgment about how to confront dangers and evils. Narratives that trade in manufactured truths tend to make things seem easy, and to ascribe blame to others. We are on more reliable ground when we see that the way forward is difficult and ambiguous. And when we acknowledge ambiguity, we can better respect those who advocate different paths toward greater justice.

One daunting aspect of the present situation, in which large segments of the public believe things that are clearly and demonstrably false, is the difficulty of changing their minds. This is true even with the institutional resources of the university. Exposure to facts does not always seem to make a difference. Cognitive scientists such as George Lakoff demonstrate that we all have foundational narratives that determine whether we will accept new facts;



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The Parade of Nations kicks off the Billiken World Festival, designed to recognize the international dimension of Saint Louis University's academic programs and to celebrate SLU's role in international education and service. © 2012 Michelle Peltier, Saint Louis University

rarely will we acknowledge data that contradicts our pre-existing worldview.

For me, these realities highlight the genius of Jesus' parables. Once, during my master of divinity studies, my homiletics professor directed us to go off for ten minutes and create a parable, which we immediately delivered to the class. Almost all of us failed miserably to create anything that functioned like one of Jesus' parables. With his parables, Jesus drew his hearers in with a story of a familiar situation, only to throw them off balance with a conclusion that upset every expectation. He left them, disoriented, to consider whether the Kingdom of God might be something very different than what they thought. When engaging parables in my classes, I often tell my students about this assignment. I joke (sort of) that the exercise left me with a whole new level of respect for Jesus. Altering the construction of our reality is hard. In the “create a parable” assignment, when I tried to think of a story that undercuts our foundational expectations, I simply fell into existing narratives in

which the recognized good guys and bad guys were reversed – I could not change the paradigm, only the positions within the paradigm.

Jesus' ability to generate these parables suggests that he was deeply tapped into a radically different vision of our lives together. The rest of us are not often so deeply rooted, so able to communicate this reality in story, but we have the advantage of practices of discernment (among them, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius) that create imaginative space for God to expand and clarify our vision.

But I would contend that we also have something like parables in each other. One way in which the university might serve as a “sanctuary of truth and justice” is by creating spaces to hear others' experiences in honesty and vivid detail. Both within and outside the classroom, it is these encounters that can dislodge the narratives and frameworks that prevent us from really taking in the nuanced nature of truth. This is one reason, in my view, why older students with work and life expe-

riences often have a deeper grasp on the social and ethical issues. This means that if we truly want to expand the vision and transform the foundational narratives of our students, we absolutely *must* enhance all forms of diversity in our student bodies. To encounter students from different religious traditions, racial identities, national origins, socioeconomic statuses, different degrees and forms of marginalization and vulnerability – this encounter is a parable; we can create conditions for such parabolic encounters in our classrooms. These conditions include trust and safety, an invitation to vulnerability and the presence of many different stories in the classroom, in and through our students.

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