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In Search of Humanity

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IN SEARCH OF HUMANITY

Exploring “bright facets of the immortal diamond.”

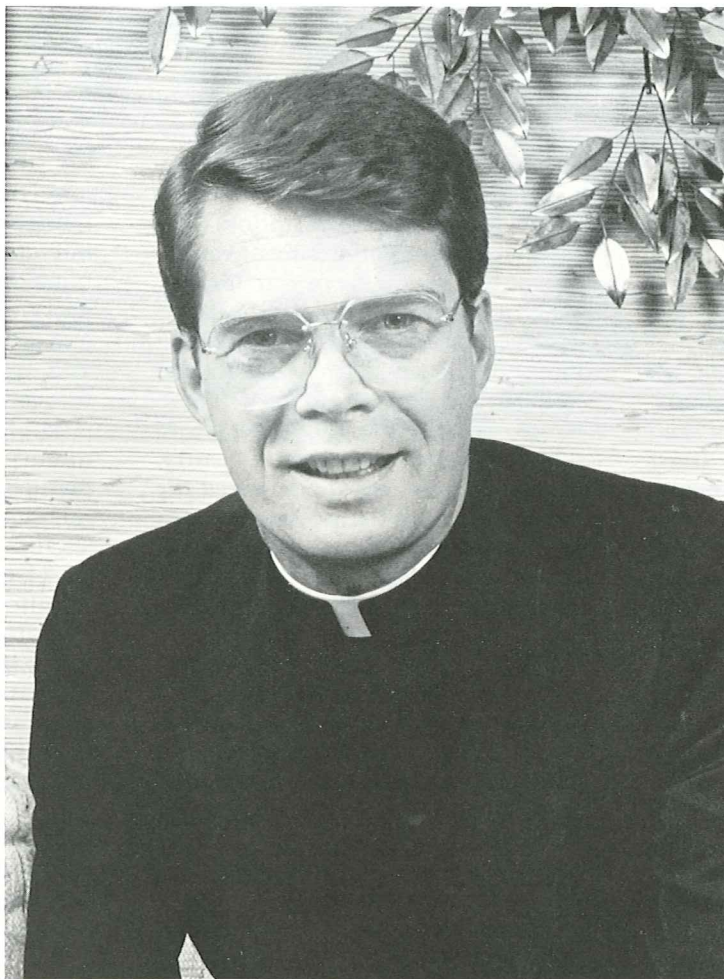
BY WILLIAM J. REWAK, S.J.

What is it that unifies our common enterprise here at Santa Clara? What makes it a common enterprise?

We live in a pluralistic society and such a question is therefore hard to respond to with any assurance. Any attempt at unity is difficult: we've been struggling with it at least since Plato first tried to figure out how the many and varied aspects of reality proceeded from one source.

But I think it's a good question, and we ought always to be searching for the answer. There are, of course, various ways of answering it. We can talk about the ultimate goal of our university: service to society. We can talk about how we all participate in the means toward that goal: the struggle for understanding and the importance that love plays in our relationships with one another and with our students. We can talk about the element in that goal that is unique to a university: our common search for wisdom. And we can talk about how wisdom leads all of us toward justice — that, as a matter of fact, the educated, liberated mind is a mind that of its nature demands justice.

Here, I would like to explore the “subject” of education. What is the primary material we have adopted



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as our work? What do we put on the slide that goes under our microscope?

It is, I believe, the human person. And it is the study of the human person that helps to unite us, to bring us into collaboration.

The criticism is often voiced that

our education “is not the way it used to be.” Such criticism usually means that we lack a common educational language, a center; we have no overarching philosophical structure, we don't demand of our students that they ingest a uniform body of knowledge.

The criticism is obviously not directed solely at Santa Clara or at Jesuit education, though perhaps because of our former authoritarianism—or, more benignly stated, a highly disciplined, gradated approach to our course work—we are particularly vulnerable to the criticism. But it is directed at education in general. And with some reason: our university curriculum, after all, is a valid response to that criticism.

There is no doubt that our 20th century civilization is characterized by fragmentation; that's become a cliché — but only because it's true. In America, for example, it's fast becoming obvious that

we have no common language and no common history, for there have been rapid changes in the ethnic structure of society. Radical political groups, of the left and right, no longer exist on the fringes of society; they have become one of the important factors in the determination of American political life.

Glenn Matsumura

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And even the *New York Times* has discovered that they can print a best-selling edition if they point to the disparity in religious beliefs and practices that exists among Catholics. Such disparity did not exist 25 years ago — or if it did it was kept carefully wrapped in a dark corner.

The fact of fragmentation is with us. It's not easy for a university to deal with because it seems we have now no generally accepted human wisdom from which to build a coherent philosophical or educational construct; it is hard to figure out which seeds will grow into which trees. It is extremely difficult to provide any coherence when the prevailing mood is one of relativity. And, too, students no longer come to a university with the same intellectual baggage: some bags are filled with history and literature and mathematics, while others are filled with sawdust.

On the other hand, students' religious commitments and social backgrounds must always be respected. And fragmentation has produced an environment of political, ethnic, economic, and religious pluralism which forces us to look more deeply at our own preconceptions and helps us from getting entangled in prejudices or unexamined assumptions.

At any rate, such fragmentation — with its advantages and disadvantages — is a mark of our modernist culture.

Irving Howe, in his book, *The Idea of the Modern*, has said, "A modernist culture soon learns to respect, even to cherish, signs of its division. It sees doubt as a form of health. It hunts for ethical norms through underground journeys, experiments with sensation, and a mocking suspension of accredited values. Upon the passport of the wisdom of the ages, it stamps in bold red letters, 'Not transferable.'" One can approve or disapprove of what he says, but one cannot deny the fact of what he says.

And when Virginia Woolf said, in

typical apodictic style, "On or about December 1910 human nature changed," she was giving voice not so much to the fact that some inherent composition of human nature had changed, but that social, economic, and religious circumstances had changed so radically that it appears as though, in dealing with those changes, we ourselves have changed: it appears that a whole new human beast has emerged.

The German novelist, Hermann Hesse, speaks about "A whole generation caught . . . between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standards, no security, no simple acquiescence."

Given this fact of disruption — of relativity, of the splintering of values, of our alienation from our history, even of a healthy pluralism — what does a university do? How does a university help society assert its heritage and understand itself? There is no common philosophy from which to build, no common history, no commonly accepted social or moral norms. What do we study to give cohesion to our work? What has always provided us a foundation upon which we help our students build a world view?

We study the human person.

That answer is not meant to be a cop out. I hope it does not sound too glib. But I think it is essential that we, who make up this Jesuit university, understand that our efforts are about humanity and for humanity.

Humanity is not an easy subject. We don't ever completely know ourselves; even less, one another. And far less, the larger arena of human civilization. Thomas Wolfe has said, "Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb, we did not know our mother's face. . . . which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Remembering speechlessly the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end

into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an un-found door."

We all seek "the great forgotten language." That search is a personal journey, but my point is that it is also a professional one, for as teachers we are always trying to analyze the grammar of the human personality; we are always trying to interpret our thoughts, our words, our scientific achievements, our paintings, our buildings of wood and stone; we are always trying to understand our political and social organizations. And we are always trying to decipher our religious aspirations.

From the very moment we looked up and saw the dawn break in upon our first day, the human race has been engaged in an introspective love affair with how the mind and the body and the heart impress themselves upon creation — and how they themselves are moved and changed by those eruptive forces, physical and divine, which continually invade the human community. All of human history is a meditation upon human actions and human response.

Our work here is important precisely because we formally monitor those actions and that response. Other institutions and other individuals may from time to time take upon themselves that responsibility, but for us it is a necessity; it is why we exist. It is our duty to chart the progress of humanity, to criticize our waywardness, preserve the good we have accomplished and try, with humble wisdom, to point the way toward human fulfillment.

But having said that — that our common work is the study of the human person — it seems to me there are two conclusions to be drawn.

First: as a Jesuit and Catholic university, there is an important presupposition about the human person which, institutionally, we adhere to. And it is this: there is that in us which is of earth — the mud, the dust, the grubbiness, and the mortal-

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Bob Cox

ity — and that in us which is of sky — the transcendent, the godly, the visionary, the immortal.

We are not angels and we are not animals. We are not spiritualists who condemn the material and sensual; we are not materialists who consider art simply a new arrangement of synapses or prayer merely an irrelevant brain wave. We are human beings. And as teachers we deal with the noblest visions of humanity in a context that is often ephemeral, comic, and ignoble.

Over the summer, I read a fine novel by Richard Hawley, *The Headmaster's Papers* — a collection of letters, speeches, and memoranda, circling around certain events and themes in one school year. The narrator is the headmaster of a high school for boys in Connecticut, and in one letter to his brother, he writes: "It is my mature feeling as a schoolmaster that

over the centuries during which schools have been established to pass on the culture to adolescents, the cumulative gains have been exactly zero. Every single boy seems to have to try being a laggard, thief, cheat, lunatic, solitary, etc., for himself. That you and I and millions of others have already learned these lessons matters not at all to these hell-bent 'tabulae rasae.' This evening as I was walking from my tidy school study to my untidy home study, a dorm master presented me with a badly shaken third former who had escalated some dorm room rivalry by urinating copiously into a balloon and then chucking this dreadful missile through the open door of his enemies. Are there appropriate words of rebuke for such an infraction? What, if anything, shall I write the parents without their losing all hope? The boy won my heart, though, by offering absolutely nothing in his own defense. Sometimes I think of my prize day speeches or addresses

to new parents [or opening year addresses to faculty] about the beautiful mission of youth and about my own beautiful mission to youth, and then I think of flying balloons full of urine."

A strange mixture of earth and sky, of ideals and reality. That is the human person; and such a conception of humanity undergirds our philosophy of education. Our education is pragmatic, it's concerned with this world and this student; with an alcohol policy and intramurals and sexual conduct and correcting papers. But it is also concerned with prayer and spiritual longings; it is concerned with vision and with God. It urges students to reach beyond themselves, to cry out, with Hamlet, "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!" Our

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education is incarnational and it urges students to honor humanity, to protect it.

A Judaeo-Christian anthropology stands behind our educational philosophy. It cannot be otherwise.

My second conclusion: as a Jesuit university, we have a long tradition in the liberal arts and sciences, the humanities. We say, correctly, that the college is the heart of our institution. For American Catholic education, and for Jesuit education since it started in the 16th century, the humanities have been central, because those are the studies that demand we face, in a formal fashion, the deepest questions of human existence: Why do we exist? How is the human person physically and psychologically and spiritually formed? Is there a God? What is a human community? What is freedom? Why do we love? It is in those studies we explore human achievement. And it is in those studies that we are formally motivated to humanize our world, to make it compassionate, to make it just.

I say all this because — in the face of a great deal of national criticism aimed at American education's neglect of the humanities — I want unambiguously to state our commitment to humanistic studies; I want unambiguously to reiterate the centrality, for Jesuit education, of the liberal arts and sciences. It is why we are here; that is the priority.

That is sometimes difficult to say in certain groups. I'm told, "You might say that to a history depart-

ment but I wouldn't say it to a finance department, or an electrical engineering department, or to the law school."

Why not?

"You may hurt someone's feelings."

I think that attitude may be mirrored among faculty members themselves. There is sometimes an undercurrent of antagonism — couched in humor perhaps, but real — between faculties of different divisions or schools: "They're getting something we're not;" or, "They're just teaching the students how to make money;" or, "They're wasting their time over there on poetry;" or, "That faculty and those students have no idea what this university is about."

In exhortative fashion, I'd like to offer a remedy — and an encouragement.

If the subject of education is the human person, then we are all, in one form or another, involved in the investigation and in the enrichment of humanity. Admittedly, it's easier, in a way, to be assured that one is directly involved with the human person when teaching child psychology or the Renaissance; it's not so easy when one is trying to find out why the software just blipped out. Admittedly, a discussion of justice in South Africa seems to have more immediate human impact than a difficult entanglement in contract law.

But there are no disciplines that are separated from human contact. There



are no disciplines that do not require, either immediately or ultimately, a human solution to a human problem.

All of us provide a human and humane education, in a humanist tradition; we are not in competition

with one another. The professors in the Schools of Business and Engineering and Law must be as supportive of our humanist goals as those in the College of Arts and Sciences. We all belong to this univer-

sity, and we all, in a specialized way, do what we can to foster those goals. A student decides to specialize, but it is our vocation — the vocation of everyone on this campus — to ensure that that student comes out of Santa

Clara with a humanist education. All of us must support that principal goal.

The arts and sciences are not a luxury; they are central to our mission. Students must be exposed to issues and questions at the core of the humanist tradition, but they can be exposed to them by any professor; and any professor ought to encourage those issues and questions. We all share a passion for life, for human accomplishment.

The College of Arts and Sciences, therefore, stands as the center of the university. It symbolizes and embodies those studies, on the undergraduate level, that define the purpose of Jesuit education. They are formally situated there; but the issues and questions and concerns that arise from those studies are a part of our common heritage and they are our common responsibility. They find their applicability in business and law and engineering — and architecture and medicine and agribusiness. And we should all be just as supportive of those specialized disciplines as we are of the humanities.

We're all in this together. In this Santa Clara faculty, there are no second-class citizens.

And I would expect, for example, that this winter's Institute on Technology and Society will underline our common responsibility. The development of technology is a human achievement with human consequences. People create machinery, they market their wares, they maneuver human populations, they establish auditing practices for companies; they arrange wires so that all of us can travel and dream and create.

We are all humanists. We must be if we are to be teachers. All of us must see our vocation as the humanizing of civilization.

Gerard Manley Hopkins ends one of his poems by describing the human person as a "Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond." It is the study of that Jack, that joke, that unifies us; that is the glory of our vocation. It is given to all of us to peer into the bright facets of the immortal diamond. □

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