

9-1981

Saints, Diamonds and Bears

William Rewak
Santa Clara University, wrewak@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl>

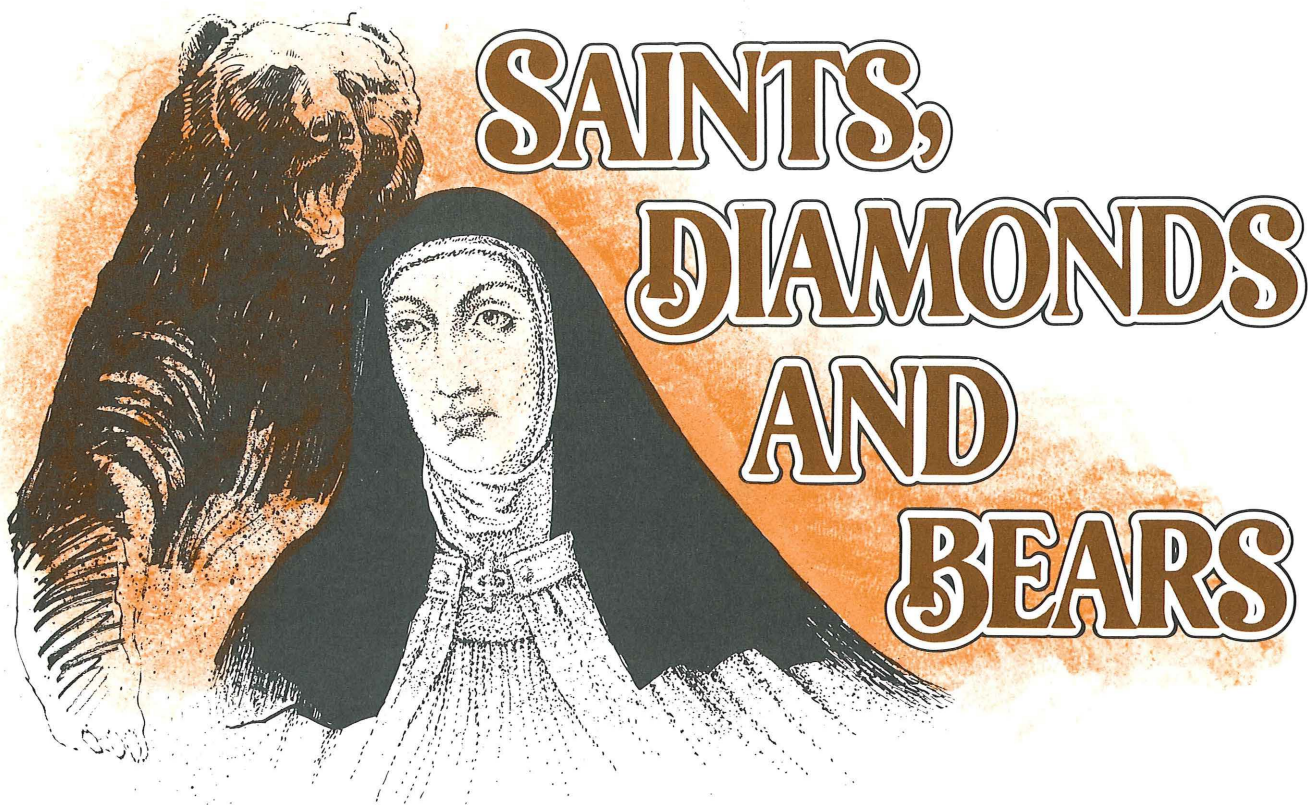


Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rewak, W. (1981). Saints, Diamonds and Bears. *Santa Clara Magazine*. 24(1) 9-11.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.



William J. Rewak, S.J.

A common complaint in academia goes something like this: "If the essential work of education is that which occurs between student and faculty member, between students themselves, or between a student and a book, then why are so much money and so much energy spent in the non-essentials: athletics, dormitories, development and alumni offices, day-care centers, social activities—indeed, all the 'support services' of a university? Wouldn't life on a campus be simpler and wouldn't our work be more effective if we were to concentrate our efforts on the essentials?"

All of us, whether we're administrators or faculty or board members, have to face this problem—which may be more one of perception than of objective fact, but that does not make it any less real or any easier to solve.

It is, I think, the ancient problem of the One and the Many—or, Unity and Multiplicity. The Greek philosophers adopted these terms as the metaphysical coordinates of a tension we experience at almost every level of our lives. They tried to reconcile the disparateness of human experience, on the one hand, with the clear human urge toward unity, on the other; and they did this, I'm sure, not just because it was an interesting philosophical puzzle for the brain, but also because such tension troubled the heart.

To be a bit more concrete. Teresa of Avila was one of the great women in a remarkable epoch of Spanish history. She was on fire with the love of God and tried as best she could to consolidate all the minutes of her days, all the myriad activities of her work as a religious superior, into one glowing act of adoration.

It is a struggle—even for a saint. Her days are filled with administrative duties: founding new convents, having the roof fixed on an old one, begging for money, getting caught in a storm and having to wade through mud and rain to make her annual visitation of another convent where the nuns complain that the food this past year has been particularly unsatisfactory. The hours for prayer become harder and harder to find.

The tension is obvious: as a contemplative, she seeks to unify, to telescope her life into one human act of love—to crush together all the discrete units of time, all the separate, individual decisions and distractions into one clear diamond. She has an urge for simplicity, for stepping back from that grubby world with its multiple demands; she wants to live quietly, to move steadily down a straight path toward her goal. No detour. No sudden chasms where she has to hitch up her habit and jump as best she can.

Teresa's life demonstrates well this human tension between unity and multiplicity because she

handled it so well, because she was able to harmonize her single-minded goal with all the activities her vocation demanded of her. She discovered that all those activities were really multiple facets of one reality: her love for God.

Is a twentieth-century campus any different from the plains of sixteenth-century Castille?

All of us share Teresa's frustrations; for us, they are frustrations that arise out of an increasingly complex, computerized society where, we've been reminded, it is not so much the problems that command our attention but the rapid pace by which they arrive—and change.

I have a little daydream I enjoy at finance meetings: I'm sitting in a seminar room, presiding over a small group of intensely concerned students



(it is a daydream). We're discussing the loss of innocence in William Faulkner's "The Bear." It's springtime, probably in the late '40s, a small campus surrounded by pink and white orchards. No smog, no rock music, no jackhammers. And, significantly, about eighty-five percent of the facilities space on campus is devoted to classrooms, teachers' offices, and the library. Ten percent to dormitories. Five percent to athletics.

It's a tempting daydream, for it suggests that what we call education today can be reduced, simply, to a space where students and teachers meet to allow for that one human interchange in which a student's heart and mind are fused, where wisdom is born, where the world begins to burn a bit brighter.

That's the goal. That certainly is the one purpose. That may not be why everyone on a campus is there; but that is why the university exists.

How simple and refreshing it would be to forget the other spaces. To forget renovation plans or

endowment or an alcohol policy. To tell our lawyer, "Sorry, we have no business for you." To tell the government, "Take a walk." To tell the students, "Show up for class, but what you do on this campus the other twenty-two hours is not our concern."

But we cannot do that, for we're operating today under new constraints. And new opportunities.

For example:

* In the 1950s, California—following New York's lead—began state scholarship programs. The Federal Government initiated massive aid programs in the '60s. Today Financial Aid Offices around the country furnish the legwork and paperwork, and institutional funds, that make a college education possible for millions. If we didn't have those services, we wouldn't have students and our society would be poorer. Even a small university, that may disburse annually over \$10 million in grants and loans, needs a full and competent staff.

* Placement Offices today provide a needed service for students who have to compete in the job market. In the '40s, only the largest universities could boast such an office; most students were on their own. Last spring alone, our own office planned 2,494 student interviews—and that is only one function of a Placement Office.

* Most will agree that on-campus living is a beneficial experience for freshmen and sophomores. Therefore, if we're going to have dormitories, we have to provide—besides the obvious needs of a kitchen, janitorial services, and intramural athletic fields—a whole range of student development services, growth programs, counseling staffs and offices. This area is the most crucial of all the non-academic services we provide: students can either be destroyed by the life they find on campus, or they can mature.

* Because the health of a university demands that the percentage of the budget dependent upon tuition be lowered as much as possible; because its effectiveness depends upon research and new programs and constantly refurbished academic resources, Development Offices have grown tremendously in all institutions. And the sophistication needed to deal with government grants and loans, with foundations and corporations, and with private individuals has become much more refined than before. Thus, increased staff, more expensive expertise, and larger spaces are needed.

We are here for that human interchange where wisdom is born, to serve intellect and to touch the human heart

* Our own Business Office this year will have processed about \$40 million in cash receipts alone; in turn-over of cash flow, investing and re-investing, it will have processed around \$100 million. In 1948, in contrast, the budget hit \$1 million, and there was some consternation about how such a sum could be managed.

* Government regulations have forced us to use work time, computer time, staff and space for studying reports, preparing our own reports, composing an egregious amount of correspondence. Such regulations and laws—and our litigious society—have established legal services as an indispensable part of administrative operations.

I could go on, but one last example: Our Faculty Handbook for 1948 was about ten pages long and was written in the form of an instruction. Interestingly enough, it forbade the faculty to teach evolution and said, furthermore: "Members of the faculty are expected to maintain a conservative viewpoint, not only within the university, but also in social, political, civil and religious fields." Today the Handbook is 100 pages long and has grown in considerable complexity. It also attempts to be a bit more sympathetic to the claims of academic freedom.

University life has, indeed, changed. It's easy, of course, to get dreamy-eyed about the past, to get frustrated because the proliferation of our activities—all necessary—can make it hard at times to discover the bond that ties them all together. We are constantly tempted toward fragmentation.

It does seem more difficult today to maintain perspective than it did in the late '40s.

However, what university administrators must do, in season and out of season—and this is surely one of their principal functions—is to assure the various campus constituencies that priorities have not changed. We are here for the work of education; we are here for that human interchange where wisdom is born; we are here to serve intellect and to touch the human heart. And all our energies and all our services are directed to that. All decisions—financial decisions and staff decisions

and facilities decisions—must be made with that priority in mind.

In William Faulkner's "The Bear," the young protagonist, Ike McCaslin, loses his innocence—symbolically—by stepping into the woods and divesting himself of the trappings of civilization: a gun, a compass, a watch. There he meets the bear, alone, with nothing to guide him or save him. Mythologically, he comes to terms with the spirit of nature and emerges from the forest a man.

The lesson is valid. At times we must divest ourselves of all the crutches of civilization in order to meet—purely and cleanly—the challenges of our world. But for most of us, that myth speaks more to a spiritual reality than to a physical reality. And it tends to be romantic.

In real life, we probably lose our innocence—or grow up—when we recognize, and accept, the multiplicity of experience. When we recognize that life is not, in daily routine, a simple task. When we become reconciled to the fact that bearing the burdens of civilization is our way of saving civilization. When the hurly-burly of life is not disdained but transformed.

For the loss of innocence can lead either to sterility or to growth. We can either fall back, stunted, afraid of our own shadow, locked in our own vacuum, cringing from the frenetic world in which we live; or we can pull through it and turn all these thousand operations we're involved in into opportunities. Creativity, I am convinced, comes from the tension between goal and opportunities, between the struggle for some kind of unity and the realization that to arrive there we have to walk a thousand steps through a thousand paths.

But it's worth it. The more facets a diamond has, the brighter it will shine. And Teresa of Avila did become a saint.

No one is going to promise us canonization—even granted that we were looking for it—but we ought always to beware of Parmenides' solution: he was tricked and disturbed by the multiplicity of experience and judged it illusion. It is not. All the aspects of our work are real and our labor is to make them all effective. They are simply ways a university has to perform that one, essential, and rather sacred duty: to excite a person's mind and heart with the beauty and the tragedy and the hope of human life.

William J. Rewak, S.J., became the 26th president of the University of Santa Clara in December 1976. An American literature scholar and poet, he received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Minnesota.