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Shall We Dance? Aesthetic Solidarity: The Antidote to Superficiality

By Maureen H. O'Connell

Service-immersion trips often give our students their first exposure to solidarity, or what John Paul II called the “firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good...because we are *all* really responsible for *all*.” Although diverse in their destinations and community engagements, these trips all seek to trouble the increasingly paralyzing conventionality in our students’ self-perceptions and worldviews by journeying into unfamiliar spaces where, with the forbearance of marginalized persons, they can understand, perhaps for the first time, what it truly means to be human. For students of the first world, this is the first step toward solidarity.

But the “superficiality of thought, vision, dreams, relationships, convictions” which Father Nicolás rightly believes are “shaping the interior worlds” of our students threatens even these experiences of solidarity. He prophetically claims that superficiality is “limiting the fullness of [our students’] flourishing as human persons and limiting their responses to a world in need of healing intellectually, morally, and spirituality.”

Turn off the Tech

Service-immersion trips are not immune to the “globalization of superficiality.” Today’s students face a variety of new challenges when it comes to committing themselves to the common good. Many construct their iden-

ties and social realities online according to personal preferences rather than in real time or with a preference for the poor. As a result, their capabilities for embodied relationships with actual persons “on the ground” or “in the field” who stand outside their enclaves of similarity are diminished. Shortened attention spans and an addiction to multitasking prompt technology detox phases on some service trips in order to help students be present to the people they encounter in their work. Virtual justice campaigns might facilitate fundraising or online petitions, but they also imbue a “fix-it” mentality that sidesteps the hard interpersonal work of “persevering determination” like solidarity. Facebook makes it nearly impossible for students to escape the centrifugal force of the self-selected faces in their social networks, often those of their service team members, or to “friend” those they have met in places beyond the reach of virtual networks.

Father Nicolás suggests that creativity is the antidote to the superficiality that threatens a well-educated solidarity. He notes, “real creativity is an active, dynamic process of finding responses to real questions, finding alternatives to an unhappy world that seems to go in directions that nobody can control.” His thoughts suggest that aesthetic turn to solidarity might be in order. By this I mean *a persevering commitment to become more*

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fully human by risking the vulnerability that comes with creative self-expression so that we might tactilely experience together in our bodies and hearts what it feels like when we are all really responsible for all.

Alvin Ailey students meet Guatemala

My 2011 spring break service immersion trip with *Juntos*, a dance company founded two years ago by one of my former students at Fordham University, Joanna Molesky-Poz '10, is a great example of what I'm talking about. The trip was more akin to a service "tour" (in the performance sense of the word) throughout Guatemala since the eight Fordham BFA students involved—full time students and dancers with the prestigious Alvin Ailey School of Dance in NYC—offered workshops for people of all ages and abilities in a variety of towns and villages. They also performed for eight different communities in a variety of venues—from a pediatric wing of a hospital and the open-air courtyard of a retirement home to gorgeous colonial theatres and vibrant cultural centers. My week with them—and their own reflections on their work—convinces me that the arts and creativity cultivate essential facets of solidarity that can resist the culture of superficiality in which our students are steeped.

First, artistic expression reconnects us with our bodies and our senses, and, therefore, provides a tactile or sensory-based understanding of world and people in it. Encountering others in an embodied way—through touch, through sound, through taste, through movement—has the power to draw our students out of the increasingly narrow confines of their hyper-segregated virtual networks and seductively lure them into the real world around them. It is here that wondrous things are bound to happen and the demands of solidarity can confront them.

"Somewhere in the midst of teaching in classrooms," recalls Marisa Martin '11, "holding hands of the orphaned young and wrinkling old, performing for close to 900 people in a beautiful theater, hurt bodies, tired eyes, hug attacks by an entire school, watching our kids perform—we fell in love."

In thinking about her re-entry into the life she put on hold for a week, Marisa implicitly posits the challenge of embodied solidarity amidst a culture of superficiality: "How does one bring a new heart into an old environment? How to stay grounded in what I truly believe in when so many of my daily activities counter-act it all?"

Second, the arts also remind us that our capability to imagine is perhaps the most essential—and under utilized—moral faculty we have at our disposal. Many of the intractable social problems our students seek to tackle through their service are resistant to logic, to right-brained or linear thinking, to the limits of language, or even to hands-on labor. Instead, solving them requires

tapping into something deeper and more provocative than the rational intellect or muscle power. Imagination breaks down the boundaries of the practical or feasible in order to ponder together what is dream-able. Novelist Toni Morrison calls this the "dance of an open mind" which is impervious to the seemingly impenetrable walls of language, gender, class and ethnicity and class, and refuses to accept that the way things are—including some of our approaches to justice—is the way things should be.

"When we share our art we share ourselves, and as artists, sharing our art is sharing the very best part of ourselves," explains Maia Dunlap '13. "Communicating through art allows us to open our hearts and our minds to each other. We learn about ourselves and those around us, no matter how different or inaccessible they may seem. Art allows us to connect on a basic human level."

Finally, creative acts of self-expression are the ultimate gift of self. To share your visions or your dreams or your hopes for yourself and others in song or poetry or theater or dance requires more than reaching into your "fix it" box in order to paint a house or building a school. Although all worthy offerings, these tangible goods are not quite the same as the spiritual gift of transcendence or the ability to reach beyond limits of our human condition in order offer a glimpse of something greater than ourselves. In taking on the risk that comes with creative self-expression we experience the vulnerability that is the common denominator of the human condition. We live with hearts open and exposed, offering the only thing that is truly ours to give—our selves.

"When I'm on stage" explains Ali Delgadillo '12, "I am in my most vulnerable state. I attack it with open arms and wide eyes just the way I was welcomed into this country and these people's lives. You must remain vulnerable and open-minded and welcome to change."

Acts of creativity have the potential for real social change because they are rooted in a kind of solidarity that springs from shared experiences of *feeling* justice in our hearts and bones and not just knowing it in our minds. I call this "aesthetic solidarity." It's the persevering determination to become more fully human by risking the vulnerability that comes with creative self-expression so that we might tactilely experience together in our bodies and hearts what it *feels like* when we are all really responsible for all. Rachel Higbee '12 puts it best:

"I keep going back to our performance at the school when in the middle of every dance, the children would break out into applause," she recalls. "It was a completely freeing experience and you could feel the joy and energy take control. We allowed ourselves to be so vulnerable... Never have I felt such raw and real energy."

Welcome, Rachel, to the dance of solidarity. ■