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From a Dying Old Woman to Derrida

By William Woody

When Adolfo Nicolás, S.J. addressed a conference last April on the challenges facing higher education, he situated both the grave problems for universities and their potential solutions within the context of the increasingly interdependent world. Father Nicolás identifies one of the most toxic qualities of globalization – its partiality toward superficiality – as the greatest threat to education today. Describing the “globalization of superficiality” as endemic, he contends that the effortless expression of immediate reactions destroys the motivation for “the laborious, painstaking work of serious, critical thinking.” Furthermore, he notes how the globalization of superficiality also shapes “thought, vision, dreams, relationships, convictions,” posing a pervasive problem to which Jesuit universities must respond.

In response to this rather bleak assessment, he suggests that a return to the “distinguishing marks of the Ignatian tradition” and countering the tendency toward superficiality offer the potential solution to these contemporary problems.

While reading and reflecting upon the Superior General’s comments, I found that his analysis of Jesuit higher education and his outline of potential solutions resonated with my recent experience at the University of Scranton. Two experiences in particular proved critical in my own personal development – one a service learning experience, the other my senior capstone seminar in philosophy. In their own way, each forced me to reflect sincerely and to assess critically my experiences and education, breaking away from the “superficiality” of thought, relationships, and experiences against which Father General warns.

I was completely out of place.

During my first philosophy class freshman year, our professor (a Jesuit) challenged us to participate in a service-learning experience that would remove us from our comfort zone and challenge us to grow. Although rather nervous at first, I began

volunteering at various hospice facilities throughout the Scranton area. One location housed terminal patients from low-income areas, many of whom had no family to visit them and marginal medical care at best. As a new volunteer with minimal training, I was thrown into a setting in which I felt completely out of place, very uncomfortable, and forced to face not only poverty, but the extreme suffering, sorrow, and loneliness of those in a lower-end hospice facility. During my first visit, I was paired with an 85-year-old woman suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, whom I visited for the seven months preceding her death.

My experience with her in hospice care overwhelmed me with a sense of utter futility. I could not cure diseases or stave off death, nor could I suddenly make her family and caretakers care about her as a person rather than as a burden or just another patient. In the face of sickness, loneliness, and immanent death, I longed to help her in some meaningful way but found myself helpless to do so. In this setting, however, I found a sense of compassion and a capacity to love that I had never experienced before. The most I could offer in this situation was myself – someone to be with her and love her near the end of her life. Even though she never remembered me from one visit to the next, I learned from her what it meant to love others in their suffering and sorrow. The experience demanded considerable reflection, struggle, and an awareness of others’ suffering –

breaking free from the superficiality of thought, relationships, and experiences about which the Father General spoke.

Jumping forward three and a half years, my senior capstone course in philosophy forced me to reassess these experiences in an academic setting through critical engagement with the thought of postmodern philosophers. Reading the works of Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jacques Derrida, we developed a better appreciation and fuller awareness of the ethical importance of “the Other” when discussing hospitality, respect, and community. Inevitably, my experiences in hospice care resurfaced,

and the course forced me to synthesize my personal experiences in service work with the academic aspect of my education. Demanding depth of thought and critical assessment, the course cultivated a sincere awareness of my experiences rather than the superficiality that haunts higher education today.

A true education must cultivate the ability to reflect critically upon one’s experiences. The incorporation of service learning alongside the academically rigorous assessment of such experiences provides one possibility (among many) of fighting against the “superficiality” found in higher education and society today. ■



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