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# The Call to Teach: Spirituality and Intellectual Life

LILLIE R. ALBERT



A university that aspires both to be Catholic and to serve the common good must do more than include nods to the importance of social solidarity in its mission statement. It must translate this into teaching and research priorities, and actualize these priorities in day-to-day activities in the classroom and the library. This will take both the courage and the humility that the privileged learn only when they encounter the reality of poverty and other forms of suffering (Hollenbach, 15).

The way that I learned to live out the mission statement of my Jesuit University was to redefine my perception of my work; I came to realize that my spirituality did not have to conflict with my work. Rather, when I linked my spiritual and my intellectual life and grounded them both in my work as a mathematics educator, I

was more substantially living out the message of that statement. In order to reach this redefinition of my work, I had to realize that the work I do is a vocation. Viewing it as such gave me the space I needed to include my spiritual self in my work, so that I did not compartmentalize the different aspects of self and keep them removed from work. How did I come to view my intellectual work as a vocation, and thus become able to bring my whole self, including my spirituality, into my work? What role did the Mission Statement of Boston College play in that process? The truth is that when I came to Boston College, I thought of my teaching and research as a job, and nothing more. It took a long and sometimes painful journey to bring me to the point that

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I find myself now, but I am convinced that I am at least currently well on the road to what the philosophers describe as a more adequate view of the truth.

In this essay, I begin by exploring my own development as a scholar within the context of the mission of my University. To help frame my inquiry, I draw upon some of the momentous issues I encountered on my journey of self-understanding as I attempted to identify and redefine my work. I reflect on the ripening of pedagogical practices that challenge students to think about the power of mathematical literacy beyond traditional practices. In particular, I discuss how Ignatian Pedagogy and Vygotskian theory\* influenced my realization that learning and teaching are contextually bound by the sociocultural experiences of the teacher and the student. I conclude this essay by situating my understandings as a scholar in the richness of meaning in which the call to teach generates a commitment to searching out Truth.

### *The Journey — Searching for Self-Understanding*

My journey of self-understanding evolved as I tried to understand the mission statement of Boston College. What did it mean both overall and specifically to me? I spent time both reading and reflecting on that mission. During this period of reflection, I began to relax in a department that actually talked openly about social justice and the University's mission. The lofty ideas expressed in the mission were not enough to keep me from being disillusioned about how my teaching was a genuine model of scholarship; however, I was involved in a personal struggle as I grappled with how to transform my work and weave it with my spiritual self. As a teacher at a Catholic university, I had to come to an understanding of my "self" and my vocation that was different from the traditional view of teachers confining themselves strictly to their academic material. At this point, I was teaching with the preconception that my spiritual life had no place in my classroom. This left me unsatisfied and full of conflicting emotions. I wanted to touch my students with my compassion and to inspire them to look at my subject matter in a new way. I did not want them to leave my courses with an outlook that was unchanged and would remain static, and yet I did not feel that I was capable of effecting such changes in my role as professor.

My perceptions began to change when I became part of *Collegium*, a week-long colloquy on faith and intellectual life. This experience came at just the right

point because it provided a medium for transition—a safe space, which allowed me to recognize my hopes and fears concerning my vocation. It did so by giving me the opportunity for listening, journaling, and reflecting, by myself and with others. As the week unfolded, the spiritual journey I found myself on prompted me to look back, to remember, and to take stock of where I have been and where I wished to go. I came to realize that God's will for me is to teach at the same level of passion and rigor with which I live in the Spirit. At the heart of this transition is that, in the Spirit, I work and walk in community with others who are called upon to teach.

The final event that surprisingly gave direction to the ongoing journey of my life was a five-day retreat of silence in January of this year. This served to confirm my sense that my work is my vocation. Ernest Boyer suggests that as a scholarly act "teaching is a dynamic endeavor involving all the analogies, metaphors, and images that build bridges between the teacher's understanding and the student's learning" (Boyer, 23). It was not until a talk during this second retreat that I began to recognize fully that God is everywhere and in everything. Becoming conscious of God's presence in everything, including my work, sparked a new insight: how could I really impact my students when I was only offering them a fraction of myself? If I truly want to commit myself to my students, I must give them the fullness of my self, including my spirituality, which is the source of my compassion and my enthusiasm. It was at this point that I realized that giving my self to my students implied a level of commitment beyond that of a job description; it implied a life's work, or calling. My teaching and research truly are my vocation.

Teaching, Aristotle argued, is a superior example of understanding. It is the expression of scholarship that comes from the mind and the heart. With this notion in mind, I began to provide experiences for my students that challenged them, while also supporting and guiding their reflections and actions. I invited them to examine their motives for wanting to teach. Is it just a career, is it out of a love for children, or is it a means towards working for

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\* Lev Vygotsky was a developmental theorist and a researcher who worked in Russia in the 1920s and 30s. The central feature of his theory is the powerful interweaving of individual learning and development with collective learning and development. Vygotsky argued that to understand and account for individual learning and development one must also consider the surrounding social environment of the individual.

the common good of all children? I wanted my students to view their role as teachers as a crucial and vital way to promote human dignity and justice. In this sense, as J. F. Kavanaugh, S.J., reasons, “The great project of education—which is that of human self-understanding in all its forms—is a project of human emancipation. It is also, in that very fact, an affirmation of human dignity. The meaning and purpose of education is justice itself. Human dignity is its premise. Human freedom is its goal” (Kavanaugh, 173). The inclusion of my spirituality in my teaching became a project of my own emancipation in which my intellectual life and spirituality merged.

### *Teaching and Living the Mission*

The Jesuit university, as an institution, is evidence of the importance that the Catholic Church places on scholarship. The faculty of a Jesuit university should be more than dedicated and knowledgeable researchers; they should also be committed and passionate teachers who manifest warmth and employ creativity in the classroom. They should be attentive to what really helps learning and human growth. They are also encouraged to use the classroom as a forum in which to bring out issues of social justice, and to emphasize the responsibilities that accompany the privilege of an education. Implicit in the concept of a Jesuit education is that learning should call forth action from the individual; thus, learning is not complete until the cycle of experience, reflection, action, and evaluation is complete. For example, the student has an experience in the classroom, either directly or vicariously, provided by the teacher. The teacher then calls forth reflection upon the experience, and ultimately, the student acts based on the reflection. Ignatius envisioned a Jesuit university forming young people who would be both able and willing to contribute to the welfare of society.

I engage my students in experiences that connect with their lives. When I ask students to revise a children’s book so that it reflects a multicultural society and includes mathematical extensions, I am engaging students in an experience that connects with their lives. My intent is to help students find ways of developing their own epistemological questions and answers. Ignatian pedagogy offers teachers and their students a chance to raise questions, and then to act on the answers they reach. Ignatian pedagogy transcends critical reflection in that it has to involve some sort of decisive and committed response, in the form of word or activity. For instance, when teaching for the common good of chil-

dren, teachers must go beyond a curiosity level of reflection on thought. It is often suggested that if teachers are further empowered, more reflective, and study their practice, they will necessarily be better teachers, and that the knowledge they produce will be commended regardless of its character or quality. This view ignores the idea that the power wielded by teachers may serve in some instances to perpetuate practices that are harmful and hurtful to students. In fact, this may undermine the work we are doing in trying to create effective learning communities, especially when our work lacks social responsibility and does not support or promote social justice. I attempt to assist students in understanding this position and others by sharing and discussing lived-experiences with them. After a class discussion about one of my past elementary school experiences, I received the following e-mail from a student:

After our math class on Wednesday, the discussion really hit me hard. I have had lectures about making the classroom environment an acceptable place for all students to learn but they never affected me the way yours did. I think that all soon-to-be teachers have an unconscious mindset about each student in the class, but that mindset is kept quiet. No one ever talks about this or presents it in a way that could relate to us personally. Your [discussion] touched me. It is something that all teachers should talk about and bring to consciousness.

I received many other similar notes as the one above. Students’ reflection helped make firm my belief that when we embrace thinking without reflection, action, and evaluation then we run the risk of further distancing ourselves from those we serve. The argument is that we need to become more conscious of our practices in deeds and actions.

In my courses many of the pedagogical activities I applied were interwoven with Ignatian pedagogy and Vygotskian theory — a pedagogical approach that is both exploratory and collaborative. Using this framework, in which there is active co-learning and joint problem-solving, the students and I create learning communities. Within these communities we use the experiences that we bring to the course to develop critical perspectives regarding how children and adolescents learn and understand mathematics. Together we grapple with how to transform learning environments into highly interactive contexts that support and assist children’s learning and development. This joining of theory and

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practice provides a framework for us to conceptualize mathematical learning from a more personal and critical perspective.

The interrelatedness of Ignatian pedagogy and social justice has supported my belief that the focus of my teaching should be upon the development of the whole person, not just the intellect. Vygotsky's work has assisted me in the development of pedagogical practices that are designed to enhance learning experiences or opportunities for supporting student development as a whole person. Such a framework calls for a reconceptualization of the traditional role of teacher and learner in that the teacher challenges students to go beyond themselves towards goals that are personally as well as socially meaningful to them and to consider the worth of those goals through integrity and justice.

### *Seeing God in all Things*

If we really want to benefit from our vocation as scholars, we must come to an understanding of how the work that we engage in becomes larger than isolated research projects, larger than just pertaining to our specific disciplines, and instead have implications that resonate in a universal context. As St. Paul says, "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but the same God who works all in all" (1Corinthians 12:4-6). The idea is that everything we do has a place in the plan of an all-knowing Creator God; this knowledge lends importance to our work, not in a self-aggrandizing way, but in a way that brings meaning to our actions and validates our callings. Indeed, the tradition of intellectual life at a Catholic university particularly emphasizes placing individual discoveries into their proper place in the broader continuum of life, connecting new findings with pre-existing theories and traditions.

Catholic intellectual life must involve commitment to searching out Truth; it does not imply accepting dusty platitudes, but rather being surprised and willing to revise old theories when new discoveries are made. What defines the Catholic intellectual life is its underlying certainty that God is the Creator of all, and that there can be no "contradiction between the God of creation and God as revealed, between the God of nature and God as redeemer," (Hellwig, 18). Boston College's distinctive mission as a "Catholic and Jesuit university, is rooted in a world view that encounters God in all creation and through all human activity, especially in the





search for truth in every discipline in the desire to learn and in the call to live justly together” (Boston College, 2). The intentionality, then, is that to live and teach for the mission is to be purposefully conscious of our experiences and worldview, and how those experiences actuate human dignity and justice. Such intentions require that teachers as well as their students be mindful and practical in achieving knowledge and under-

standing of the human conditions that they confront. As James Fleming, S.J., suggests, “Consciousness-raising education needs intentionality, and if such education is taken for granted it is likely not to take place. Our hopes are not that people simply understand justice, but that they live justly” (Fleming, 8).

If the faculty members of a Jesuit university are called to bring their fullest expressions of self to their teaching and their research, the University has to do more than provide for the faculty’s professional development. At the same time that the University provides for research seminars, conferences, and other professional experiences, it should advocate the spiritual development of its faculty as well. It was my engagement in activities that focused on the understanding of the spiritual self that assisted me in bringing my respect and value for human dignity and freedom into my classroom. Taking the time to be spiritually awake reaffirmed my commitment to teaching and research endeavors that embody Boston College’s mission.

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