BACK TO THE SOURCE:
Renewing Jesuit education for the 21st century

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I’ve been working in higher education for almost 30 years, and for most of those years I have lived in college dormitories with undergraduates — first at Georgetown University where I taught history, later as the Dean of Fordham College, and now at Fairfield University — where, as the President, I do — now — get to have my own house.

Living with college students and educating them — it’s inevitable that I would come to certain conclusions about how the whole process works — or ought to work — and that I would have arrived at some ideas about what is going on in the personal lives of our young people.

As a Jesuit, I have a particular obligation to be engaged in deepening my understanding of what education is all about.

When St. Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus in 1540 he had every intention of creating a missionary order — one that would preach and give spiritual counsel — and indeed, Jesuits do that — but in 1547 the city fathers of Messina in Sicily asked Ignatius if he would open a school in their city to educate their young men in the humanities.
Remember, this kind of liberal arts education was just coming into vogue.

The whole idea that people who were not going to be lawyers or clerics should be educated to read Latin and Greek, perform plays, recite poetry, and learn all this for the purposes of refining and perfecting their minds in order to make them more civilized persons — this was a relatively new concept.

We take it for granted that education enhances the quality of our life — but that was not the assumption in Western Europe up until the late Renaissance.

Ignatius and his early followers were all educated men. They had attended the University of Paris together. Ignatius himself was nothing if not a fiercely driven student. He had been a soldier. But in 1521 his leg was shattered by a cannon ball at the battle of Pamplona and he spent a year in painful recuperation at his family estate, where he turned to reading about the lives of the saints, and his process of conversion and education began.

He spent the next 14 years or so fervently committed to broadening his knowledge. He was already 33 when he went to Barcelona to study grammar. He then went on to Paris where he received a masters of arts degree in 1533, at the relatively advanced age of 42.

My point is that when the city fathers of Messina asked Ignatius if he would educate their sons, he seems to have immediately grasped what a profound opportunity his new Society was being given to “help souls,” as he would put it. Education would bring people to God, it would form men who would themselves go on to be teachers, lawyers, doctors, administrators, playwrights, and priests. In turn, these educated people would help transform others by their example, and by running the affairs of the world in a more civilized and compassionate manner.

By the time of Ignatius’ death in 1556, there were 35 Jesuit colleges across Europe, and 200 years later there more than 800, including schools in Japan, China, India, and South America — the largest educational network the world has ever seen.

So, education as a mission of service to the human community is what being a Jesuit has been about ever since.

In recent years, I have given a lot of thought to what kind of education is needed today — for the young people coming of age in our globally interconnected and increasingly fragmented world. Their needs today are no more specific and culturally determined than those of the youth of Sicily in 1547.

Before I go any further I want to preface my reflections by saying that we are fortunate in this country to have good schools, excellent universities, and the world’s best graduate schools in the sciences and the humanities.

Having said that, I believe that a majority of our young people today is desperately missing something in their early formation, and that to a troubling extent, our society and our colleges are failing them.

I’m not alone in thinking this. In the last few years there have been scores of books about our colleges and their failings. The titles alone give you the overall picture: Academically Adrift, Limited Learning on College Campuses was very much in the news last year when it came out with the finding that after two years of college, student capacity for critical thinking had not appreciably improved.
Here are some other titles: *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* by Anthony T. Kronman, Sterling Professor of Law at Yale; *Our Underachieving Colleges* by Derek Bok, former president of Harvard.

Here are some others: *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture; The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement; College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crises and What to Do About it;* and *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future.*

The titles alone tell the story, but let me share with you a few findings from these books and studies:

- According to the American College Health Association, 46 percent of college students say they have felt that things were hopeless at least once in the previous year.
- In 2009, 17 percent of college students were diagnosed with depression — twice as many as in the year 2000.
- Nationally, a little over half of students enrolled in a four-year college will graduate.
- Over 40 percent of college students admit to cheating or plagiarism in some form.
- More than 100,000 college students report every year that they were “too intoxicated to know if they consented to have sex.”
- A sharply increasing number of college-age Americans score high on tests that test for narcissism.

As alarming as these findings are, I think the one that troubles me most is the finding of the Higher Education Research Institute’s survey of college freshmen in 2009.

Over 80 percent of the students reported that “being well-off financially” was the reason that they were attending college, the highest number of students responding in this manner since the survey began in 1966.

“Developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” which was what a majority of students reported as the reason to attend college in 1966, has dropped to its lowest reported level.

So, obviously, students don’t expect to develop a meaningful philosophy of life at college, nor do they think they need one — even though they apparently feel hopeless sometimes.

There are some factors to consider at this point: Obviously, the economics of higher education and the realities of the marketplace are a very big determining factor in the way both students and colleges operate. Student debt is at an all-time high. College costs have risen at five times the average rate of inflation since 1985. Under the circumstances, developing a meaningful philosophy of life might be considered a luxury.

But the overall picture that I think we are seeing if we look at our young is that many of them are suffering from what we might call despair.

Many of our young people are in this condition as they lack a sense of purpose other than limited personal ambition; they lack a sense of direction, or access to an internal compass that leads them to make good decisions.
All indicators suggest that we have failed to create an environment in which our young people mature along a path that helps them to grasp the value and dignity of their true nature as human persons — and as a consequence of this — they have not grasped that they have a role to play within a fabric of a community, a community that will provide them with a solid personal foundation, and a deeply interiorized sense of purpose.

We forget that for hundreds of years most of us were born and raised in households and communities that — whatever their failings — shared certain foundational beliefs. We might call them religious beliefs, but certainly they were widely shared assumptions about life.

All of the great universities of the United States, let’s remember, were originally founded by religious denominations and had as their expressed purpose the mission of forming men — men first, and then women — in morals and character, so that they would go on to live exemplary lives — lives of service.

In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Andrew Delbanco, the director of American Studies at Columbia writing on this subject quoted Benjamin Franklin, founder of the University of Pennsylvania, who defined an education in the true sense as “an Inclination join’d with an Ability to serve Mankind, one’s Country, Friends, and Family; which Ability… should indeed be the great Aim and End of All Learning.”

“To serve mankind…” I think it is fair to say that for centuries most educated persons would have believed that they were part of a larger project — whether it was a Divine project or a political project. They would have taken it for granted that their work was a contribution to commonwealth, and had dignity under the eyes of an all-seeing God.

As the Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote in 1795 “The honest man, tho ever so poor
Is King of Men, for all that.”
[English translation]

That we all possess an inherent dignity because we are equal in the eyes of God was an almost universally held belief.

Whether this is true or not: to believe that one’s life and work is either in harmony or disharmony with a Greater Good is a tremendously unifying belief. At the very least, it is a perspective that cannot help but lead a person to humility and a sense of proportion.

So something has been lost, and we see that loss reflected in the despair of our young people.

Once upon a time perhaps, we could count on our churches, synagogues, mosques, secondary schools, and families and neighborhoods to teach people what is truly of value, and to give them a sense of their inherent worth, but I don’t think we can count on this anymore.

So, what is to be done? At Fairfield, we have turned back to our roots and traditions to seek an answer, and I think we have found it — in the very life of St. Ignatius with which I began, and in particular in the core tenet of Jesuit education, and that is the practice of *cura personalis*, which we often translate as *care of the whole person*.

Very often we simplify this idea and speak about *cura personalis* as developing our students in mind, body, and spirit. To translate *cura personalis* this way is a bit misleading. It implies that it simply means that we give our students
a well-rounded educational experience — a bit of study, mixed up with a bit of community building, with a little intramural basketball thrown in to keep them fit and healthy.

In truth, *cura personalis* describes a relationship — it is a kind of conversation. When we talk about “cura personalis” in terms of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius — the foundational document of the Society of Jesus — we talk about the cura in terms of a relationship of trust between a person who is on a spiritual retreat, and the spiritual director who is giving the retreat.

What makes this conversation unique is that the one who is giving the retreat is no more than a guide — meant to listen very carefully to the unique experiences that the retreatant is going through, and to encourage the one taking the retreat to become open to what their own hearts are telling them, to their own deepest yearnings, desires, and fears.

So we are talking about a relational dynamic of trust, and an overarching belief that the Truth will rise in the heart of the one taking the retreat. So that’s what *cura personalis* means within the context of a religious retreat.

What does *cura personalis* mean then within the context of higher education? The simplest way to give you the flavor of it is to return to the story of St. Ignatius.

St. Ignatius — as a person — was transformed from being a rather despairing, some might say shallow and narcissistic young man into a man of great compassion and utter dedication to the welfare of his fellow men and women. In effect, he discovered who he really was, and what he really desired in the depth of his heart, and this freed him to be an authentic human person.

How did that happen? It happened because in Ignatius’ own words, God “taught” him who he was. Every moment of his life following his wounding at the battle of Pamplona, Ignatius experienced himself as being under the tutelage of a Created World that was educating him, deliberately and personally, guiding him to greater awareness.

Think how radical an experience this is — it is not the experience of one man striving to learn things, driven by his own needs and ambitions.

Rather, it is a Created World — A Divine Consciousness — that is reaching down, personally, as Ignatius would say *de arriba* or “from above,” to teach, to encourage, to expose Ignatius to broader visions, to give him strength and the tools he needed to grow more fully into his humanity.

Jesuit pedagogy — the *cura personalis* within a Jesuit university — holds that this dynamic is true for every single one of us, whether we are aware of it or not. It holds that God is present in all things, and that the desire in us to know is matched by a world that is coherent, and wants to be revealed to us.

“The Two Standards” is the most famous meditation in the Spiritual Exercises in which the one taking the exercises is asked to imagine two armies gathered on a great plain, with their flags and banners waving, preparing for battle — remember, Ignatius had been a soldier. He’d seen such things. One Army was that of Lucifer, and the other is the Army of Christ (again these must be appreciated within the intellectual context of the 16th century; we are free to understand these opposing forces more broadly.)
During the exercises, the retreatant is asked to choose which side he wants to fight on. Does he want to fight on the side of selfishness, riches, envy, and deceit, or the side of compassion, humility, and kindness?

Within the context of Jesuit higher education, we, in effect, ask our students to make this decision. We also — we hope — create a learning environment that is fundamentally an ongoing conversation of mutual trust between our students and their teachers, in which we hope to encourage our students to have some kind of revelatory experience of their own inner drive to become who they are — an analogous experience to that of Ignatius.

Dr. Paul Lakeland, one of the distinguished members of our faculty, reframes the Two Standards in the context of Jesuit pedagogy this way:

“It is “a choice between energies that promote the truly human in a world that is our home, and those that are in effect anti-human. Ignatius encourages us to use our imaginations to see beneath the surface of things, to see that the world is a site of decision-making, that we really cannot just absolve ourselves from the need to take sides. Will we side with the forces of good, with everything that supports human flourishing? Or will we side with the forces of evil, of all that is destined in the end to narrow and destroy the truth of human community and solidarity?”

So this is what a values-based education in the Jesuit tradition must now be about. We have to be universities that teach our students how the world works, but then we have to go further, and ask our students to ask themselves what is really important, globally, and ask them to choose what side they are on.

What really serves the common interest? What is an authentic human response to suffering? Are we content to simply look after our own interests, or are we obligated to serve the human community as well?

We need to teach our students how to think about the problem, and then we need to help them to see that they have a choice to make, and that the answer to the question of what road to take can be found in their hearts if they look deeply enough.

Now, the great thing about all of this in my view is that while many of involved in Jesuit education may embrace a Catholic understanding of the Divine milieu — it is not essential that our students believe it in order to benefit from it!

A learning environment that operates in the belief that truth resides in the heart of each student, that Creation is reaching out to be understood — in the sciences, math, music, the humanities — and that as their humanity deepens, our students’ desire to serve their community will make itself manifest — an environment that believes this is true and develops its programs to foster these truths, will generate this maturational outcome in students without the student even noticing.

It is not that students need to be “given” religion. What I am saying is that they need the experience of maturing inside a learning community that believes that life is meaningful and purposeful — from this, they will internalize a sense of meaning and purpose.

In the world of higher education, there is room for all manner of educational expressions.

But I believe that the students of today need to be introduced to the fundamental truth of their humanity. They should not despair, because within their hearts is a love of truth that has
been part of them from the beginning, and which cannot be taken away from them. *Cura personalis* within the context of a university setting should awaken the love of truth in the hearts of our young people, and then provide them with what they need to follow this love of truth, so that they experience themselves as alive in the fullest and noblest sense of the word.

That is the transformation we seek for our students. It is the antidote to despair. Such an approach is essential, I believe, if we hope to continue to be a country that is governed by men and women who have the confidence — and the fundamental belief in the goodness of creation — that they will be moved to go forth and transform our world for the better.