Flourishing, not Fear: Why Aren't We Flourishing? (Part I)

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Recommended Citation  
Morse, MaryKate, "Flourishing, not Fear: Why Aren't We Flourishing? (Part I)" (2009). *Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary*. Paper 17.  
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Flourishing, not Fear: Why Aren't We Flourishing? (Part I)

MaryKate Morse

I am a Christian academic and pastor. I have taught hundreds of students, planted two churches, spiritually directed and mentored leaders, created new programs, spoken all over the United States and overseas, and published. I’ve been doing these things for 20 years. However, I sometimes feel more stuck than free. And I am not alone in this feeling, even though I am one of the most privileged women in the world. As Christian professional and academic women we represent some of the most mature, intelligent, and capable people in any culture. And yet as I have talked with my fellow sisters, I’ve found that many of us struggle in our callings. As cultural elites we sometimes feel more trapped in our work than alive in our humanity, and for good reason.

For many of us, our disciplines and businesses require us to live in the rational parts of our minds and in an intense competitive world. The basis of our research and publication is often to disprove or improve upon the thinking of someone else. A business is successful only if we entice customers from a possible competitor. In order to succeed we must be recognized above others. It’s a rigorous and isolating life. Success and recognition is for the few and fortunate. This way of life takes its toll. Academic departments and businesses are notorious for power struggles and broken relationships. As participants in these places we have tremendous privilege, but we are often stressed and isolated, living without much joy. We are weary in the midst of abundance. So, why aren’t we flourishing?

In order to flourish we must first be fully human. Irenaeus, a second century church father and apologist, wrote, “The glory of God is a human fully alive.” When we are fully alive in our humanity, not just in our reason or in an inner spiritual realm, we are flourishing as God intended. As professionals we often reduce our humanity to what we think and what we accomplish and not to who we simply are. God created and blessed males and females to be fruitful, to fill the earth and manage it. Being created in God’s image and being released to live freely in the world pleased God, and God said, it was very good.

We are not like other living things precisely because we are made in God’s image to have a higher level of thinking and feeling imbued with a natural responsiveness to God. Unlike animals we use our minds with complex sophistication. Our critical thinking, choice-making, discovering, planning, and writing, all set us apart from other living things. We have ideas, and we’re creative. We express and engage the world with our minds. Ironically then, of all living things we should flourish the most because we use our minds constantly, and as Christians we have the added benefit of the indwelling presence of Christ. Yet this is the conundrum: our minds haven’t helped us flourish as much as we would expect. We bicker, disagree, compete, strive just as much as the
person who isn’t as educated or who doesn’t have Christ and sadly, maybe more so. We are often simply better at being charming while we disagree.

I believe the second truth and the next part of the problem is our capacity to reduce who we are to our thinking and our accomplishments. Our rational minds and productivity consumes us and deceives us. So our whole self, our full humanity, is hidden or sometimes even lost. We treat the rational part of our brain as a “stand-alone” entity. And the fruit of our rationality, our products, is proof of our success and value. However, the rational part of our mind is deeply influenced by our emotions. Feeling is deeply synonymous with being alive. Feeling is part of our shared image with God. Feeling was part of the expression of Jesus’ humanity. Feeling fully and being connected to others emotionally permeates to the core of what it means to be a human being.

Researchers found that if you remove the limbic area, the emotional center of the brain, in a mother rat, she becomes completely anti-social and destructive to herself and others. If you remove the neo-cortex, the rational part of the brain, she is still a loving mother. In other words, if feelings and relationships are ignored, minimized, or dismissed, it is unlikely that we can flourish fully. God created human beings to be a synthesized, highly integrated organism of thinking, motivated by feeling, and moved to action.

What happens to professionals is that as our thinking and our activity becomes more and more the part that defines us, we become disconnected from our feelings and from our whole self. When that happens often the dark side of our mind flourishes, not the light. According to biologists, humanity’s sophisticated reasoning capacity is also our Achilles’ heel. We notice when resources are scarce. When they are, the need to preserve self-interests can consume us, and we become harsh competitors. We judge and we avoid precisely because we have determined that someone else is either not a threat and thus dismissed, or is more of a threat and thus criticized. Will Durant wrote, “To criticize others is a dishonest way of praising yourself.”

But the rational, competitive mind is not a picture of human flourishing. Since we are created in God’s image to be fully human and since our thoughts, feelings, and actions all create in us a fully human experience, how might we flourish? What sabotages the full expression of our humanity? What switches us from the loving to unloving use of our rational capacities? How can we maintain a fully human state so that we might flourish as God intended? The next three essays address these questions and propose a spiritual discipline to live as God designed us to live.

April 21, 2009