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"The Classroom Is Not Enough..."

The Reason for Residence Life on a Christian Liberal Arts Campus.

by David M. Johnstone



Introduction:

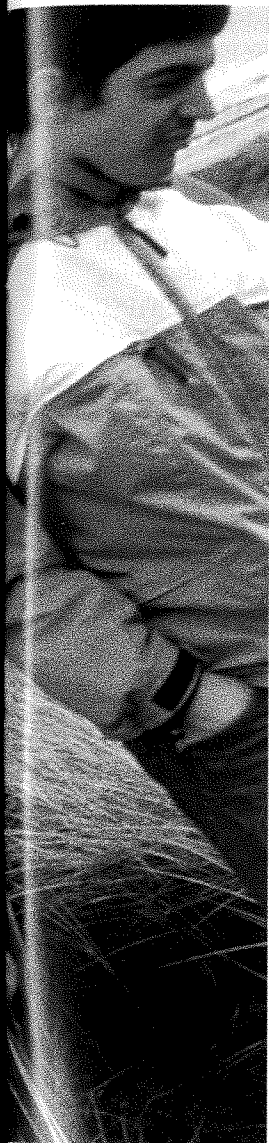
As American troops moved into Afghanistan in the fall of 2002, they were confronted with a disturbing situation. Among the prisoners of war, a 20-year-old California man turned Taliban fighter had been identified. John Walker Lindh "*chose to reject American liberalism in order to serve a regime that oppressed women, stoned homosexuals to death and executed dissidents.*"¹ His education seemed to be a mix of alternative schools, his mother's Buddhism, Malcolm X's Islam, and Islamic studies in Pakistan and Yemen.² Neighbors boasted that not only had he learned "to accept other cultures and peoples," but that his home neighborhood of the San Francisco Bay area, also "*encourages critical thinking about the US role in the world.*"³ While his learning

seems to have been diverse, an education that truly encouraged critical thinking and liberated him seemed to have been elusive. Upon surveying the details of his life [and the type of society the Taliban encouraged], he did not seem to have a community that encouraged him towards a life of discipline, grace and accountability. I would like to use this observation as a starting point for a discussion of the educational role of "community" particularly in a liberal arts setting [while not desiring to spend more time on this particular man's story]. In discussing the idea of the community, I would assert that the academic community, to the degree that it is distinct from the institution and its curriculum, plays a significant and major role in a student's life and education. More specifically, I would suggest that a college's residence life pro-

gram is the best equipped and positioned to encourage the creation, development and maturity of a campus community.

Community and the Liberal Arts:

Initially, the question arises over whether a community is really a significant and necessary part of the learning process. Repeatedly asking students whether they would be able to learn by themselves, their answer has been a unanimous "no". In fact, panic enters their eyes when they try to imagine learning course material, understanding theories and doing lab work without someone with whom they can interact. The biblical adage "iron sharpens iron" seems quite pertinent in this regard. Beyond this, Parker Palmer



identifies that "truth" itself is a relational pursuit. It is "to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns."⁴ The relational aspects of learning are the foundations of an educational community.

The notion of a citizenship that benefits the community as the end goal has long been a part of the understanding for a liberal education. For the classical Romans: "The typical justification for the study of the liberal arts seems to have been that such study is essential if a man is to play the role of citizen of the republic."⁵ With the return to classicism, the humanists asserted, "the aim of education is to prepare the student to play his role of citizen in the city."⁶ Some interpreters have even suggested that if "the life of man as a citizen is the proper aim of education; liberal studies were deemed essential to this end."⁷ This view of the purpose of a liberal arts education was still

prevalent up to the middle of the twentieth century.⁸ In conjunction with preparing a person for a role as a citizen within the community, a liberal arts education also sought to form individuals of good character⁹ and virtue.¹⁰ These were the twin aims of classical liberal arts.

My argument, however, is that the idea of community should not arise only in the discussion of the benefits or aims of the liberal arts. The community should also be acknowledged as one of the necessary parts needed for liberal arts education to develop. The notion and reality of community is integral to the means and success of a liberal arts education. It is an essential component for the accomplishment of the aims of that education. While most would agree that a liberal arts education should encour-

age thoughtful citizens and persons of character, the quality of the communities in which individuals reside and are educated are frequently overlooked. Ernest Boyer observes that these residential communities are extremely important: "the effectiveness of the undergraduate experience relates to the quality of campus life."¹¹ Therefore the community takes a critical role in the education of the student. Boyer's use of the word "quality" can be evaluated by a student's level of involvement, participation, engagement, and interaction in campus life. This quality is directly tied to the relationships students build with peers, staff and faculty. They will appreciate their education, but they will value the relationships. Further, reflecting on cognitive, faith and moral development,

Sharon Parks asserts that growth "absolutely depends on

the interaction between the person and his or her environment."¹² It is clear that a campus environment can have a tremendous impact on the success and survival of a student. Therefore, to assert that a campus environment can have a significant influence on the development of a student is not unusual. Yet, how is a community placed within a paedagogical paradigm? How is it intentionally used for educating students?

Community and the Learning Process:

V. James Mannoia explains why the notion of community is important for the paedagogical enterprise. He describes four variables (outlined below) as being essential for what he describes as *critical commitment*. Critical commitment on the part of students is being neither dogmatic nor cynical, Mannoia describes it as being

... beyond dogmatism in applying the best critical tools available to the real questions of life. They go beyond cynical skepticism in their willingness to be committed in spite of doubt. They recognize the limitations of human understanding and yet are prepared to take a stand and even stake their lives.¹³

Critical commitment is one way of describing the aims and goals of a liberal arts education. It propels a student to grasp a mixture of knowledge and understanding in order to make wise decisions. It equips a student

to assess information and extrapolate implications that enable them to commit themselves to strong positions with humility and realism.

Mannoia suggest that there are four variables necessary to encourage critical commitment in a student. These are described as: provoking (1) *dissonance*, encouraging (2) *habituation* while providing both (3) *modeling* and (4) *community*. These factors frequently dovetail, but each is necessary for deep growth. Ideally, all aspects of the campus experience are tools for creating *dissonance* in a student's life. Examples of these range from the material taught in the classroom, the relationships the student observes between faculty and staff, the worship that happens in chapel, to the

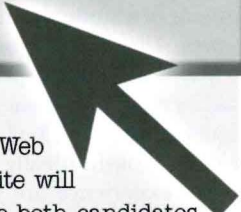
The relational aspects of learning are the foundations of an educational community.

conversations with peers over a meal. All of these inter-

actions are means by which tensions, questions and "angst" are discussed and explored. These "tools" challenge the way students experience their lives. They encourage students to examine the lens by which they view the world. Dissonance by itself does not bring the student to a level of understanding and wisdom. The purpose of dissonance is to encourage the student to identify and integrate the implications of their reflections into a way of life that exhibits more integrity. These implications are translated into *habits*, patterns and "ways of living" which reflect a thoughtful and critical response to these situations which provoke questions. However, living examples that demonstrate and provide options for responding to these issues must also be present. These *models* are individuals that provide students with multiple responses or even paradigms for responding to situations or living their life. Besides *modeling*, a student also needs an environment that provides security and safety. A *community* provides the context that gives the student this sense of security in the exploration of their own identity and learning.¹⁴

In this discussion of the liberal arts, we are particularly concerned about Christian liberal arts. Therefore, in a discussion about community and the liberal arts, it is necessary to state the obvious: Jesus Christ is and should be the center of any campus community. As Mitchell writes:

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If community has to do with mutual compatibility, similarities in educational background, psychological make-up, or social status, rather than the Lordship of Jesus, we are building on the premise that something more than Jesus is necessary for unity to occur.¹⁵

Christ must be the center of any institution that claims allegiance to him.

Defining "community:"

There is a challenge in defining the term "community," for it can be a fluid term, difficult to identify and define. It is used to describe groups with similar aspirations, and others who have large and nebulous shared experiences. I would suggest that in the light of what Mannoia identifies as being needed for deep learning, a community needs to provide and encourage a couple of factors in order to successfully be a part of the educational process. While I will describe these in different terms, Parks has captured the essence of what a community needs for it to be an educational agent. A community must provide for its members a balance of what she calls the "two great yearnings."¹⁶ It seeks to respond to "the yearning for exercise of one's own distinct agency (one's own power to make a difference) and the yearning for belonging, connection, inclusion, relationship, and intimacy."¹⁷

Community as a Place of Security and Intimacy:

As Parks suggests, students are desperate for intimacy. Their friendships are inviolable and of great influence.¹⁸ The greatest sin, in their eyes, is betrayal or breaking trust. Ironically, while they seek depth in their relationships, they are surrounded by a culture that is fearful of intimacy. Intimacy implies risk, commitment and potential pain; these are intimidating possibilities for an individual. North American culture is also permeated with sexual imagery that extols the virtues of gratuitous sex. While pundits suggest otherwise, there is no intimacy in the casualness in media depicted sexual relationships. It is no wonder that students are deeply conflicted. As Levine and Cureton observe, "Traditional dating is largely dead on college campuses."¹⁹ Students move toward group dates, casual one-night stands, or other unpartnered group activities as a way of preventing the vulnerability of close relationships. These are "practice[s] that provide... protection from deeper involve-

ment and intimacy."²⁰ With parallel thoughts in their conscious and unconscious students are afraid of intimacy, yet are longing to be known. While they are hesitant to move towards vulnerability, they have an intuitive desperation for relationships deeply rooted in trust, mercy and kindness.

Students are coming from hard painful backgrounds permeated with abuse, eating disorders, family suicides, school and personal violence, drugs, sexual experience and spiritual desperation. In Levine & Cureton's study, "deans of students reported on the growing rate of dysfunctional families among their students. They talked of violence; instability; blended families; emotional, sexual and financial problems."²¹ Freshmen are starting at a different place than past student generations. Christian students have not been protected from these traumas. "The bottom line is that students are coming to college overwhelmed and more damaged than those in previous years."²² As the theme for the sitcom *Cheers* sings, students are looking for a place where "everyone knows their name." To be known, to be able to trust, to be accepted irregardless of the things you do or don't do is the yearning of their heart. Many long for roots, a sense of belonging, and strong relationships, but they fear they will never have them.²³

This fear is the greatest tragedy, for the Christian campus is more than able to meet the "yearning" of these students. A Christian campus can be a place of refuge for the fearful; it can bring grace and trust into their lives. A Christian campus community can [and should] provide deep opportunities for security and the possibilities for intimacy. How this works out in real terms can be seen by the following responses to students:

- a. A young woman whose family has been obsessive about exercise, athletics and appearance was in the midst of major struggles with bulimia. She regularly vomited; daily used laxatives and significantly exercised two or three time a day. She found grace, kindness and affirmation from peers, staff and teachers not for what she accomplished or how she appeared. She found that others could love her just for being a child of God.
- b. A male freshman was suspended for a major alcohol situation and then was caught up in another significant discipline issue. He was considered a "bad

boy" on campus, but at home, he was the "good boy." At home, all he did was drink; all his friends snorted cocaine. Through the investment of staff and students, he began to make wiser choices about the way he lived. Most of all, he came to understand that acceptance was not contingent on what he did or did not do.

- c. The collaboration of Residence Life staff with academic advisors to intervene in the lives of students who are struggling academically demonstrated to students that they are not just a faceless number. This became a demonstration that multiple areas of campus were committed to assisting students in succeeding.

Answering work orders, navigating network concerns, responding to medical emergencies, and learning names all become a means for communicating to the student that they have a place in this community. That someone is prepared to expend some energy for their sake is often a surprise to

many students. These seemingly mundane tasks are ways to assist a student in realizing that it is possible to develop intimacy, find people to trust and establish a place of refuge and security. When dissonance arises, an environment of security is paramount for a student. However, at the same time the community and environment must be a place that challenges, provokes and broadens the student's vision.

Community as a place of Significance and Purpose:

A healthy community is one that is able to look to the needs of its members by providing intimacy, security and deep relationships. However, if this becomes the primary hallmark of a group, it becomes dangerously exclusive and insular. If a community asserts that one of its missions is to reflect Jesus [as "Christian liberal arts" implies] it must be inclusive and purposeful. For a community and its members to maintain a life, which exhibits the life of Christ, they must seek both the

inward care of its members and external impact on the world. This need for an external impact is felt by many students. It is a need "to make a difference."²⁴

This need to make a difference is also defined as a need for significance. I would assert that all human beings have a need for both security and significance. They need a place of safety and intimacy, but they also need to have a purpose. Students need to realize that they will be missed. Someone will notice if they are not present, they have a role to play in this world. It is tied to their visions and dreams about life. They are desperate to know what happens after college. Their four years at college should be a time when they begin to see how they might collaborate with the Spirit of God in multiple vocations and places. It should be a time when they are surprised with how God uses them in current events and future moments. It is a time when their vision and worldview is blown beyond their horizon.

How is this done through a residence life

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program? It is done by challenging students to consider leadership roles for which they do not feel qualified. It is by assisting them with study skills that open up the vistas of an undeclared major to the pursuit of scholarship in mathematics, literature or fine arts. It is encouraging them to participate in debating tournaments that demonstrate their skills as communicators. It is helping the "prima donnas" "get over themselves" so that they are able to extend kindness and blessings to others. It is by bringing faculty and staff to share their stories so that students discover new models for living their lives. By providing tools, resources, relationships and connections, Residence Life can assist students to envision what they can and might do in the spheres in which they live.

Is this "community building" restricted to residence life? I would suggest that all who describe themselves as members of the community have a responsibility for it. While Residence Life may be the best equipped and structured to encourage a community's growth, all members have a role to play. Too often individuals will excuse themselves by asserting that they are not trained well enough in "that area or discipline" or "that they are not a good enough model." They are concerned that they may do more harm than good or they just want an excuse. Nothing can be said to the faculty or staff member who does not want to interact with students in less than a formal classroom role. However, to those who disqualify themselves a change of perspective is needed. It is true that not everyone is a professional counselor, mentor or advisor. As well, students do not need more peers [those who are equal]. They need those who are prepared to stand beside them or in "their corner." Standing beside them can be as simple as teaching a student to bake a pie or join you in changing the oil of your car. It is as uncomplicated as setting an extra plate and having the student join you for a meal. There is something significant about sharing the seemingly mundane things of life with someone who rarely experiences them. A meal without a tray; laying on a non-institutional carpet; playing with a child; having a candle lit in a dining room; washing dishes after a meal are some of the simple things a student never experiences while at college. These experiences become moments of conversation and connection between faculty/staff and a student. These are moments that can further a student in

their academic pursuits and their spiritual maturity. Seize these opportunities; the risk is worth the extremely high return one receives. The campus community is deepened every time this happens.

Community is the reason for Residence Life:

The Annapolis Group, an assembly of leading liberal arts institutions and their leaders, has written in its mission statement that:

...residential liberal arts colleges, with the kind of community of learning and living they create, offer one of the most transforming environments in which to pursue a post-secondary education."²⁵

A campus residence life program, if it seizes the vision of community building, is the best positioned constituency to assist in the development of the setting needed for learning. Purely by its influence on vast numbers of the residential liberal arts college community, it has the ability to shape and sculpt the experiences and culture of the campus.

However, residence life's greatest asset is also its greatest weakness. Residence Life staff members are some of the few on a college campus who are given the mandate and time to establish relationships with students, staff and faculty. Theirs is the opportunity to establish connections between the different areas of campus. They are free to use multiple means and styles in order to foster understanding and respect between the various spheres that make up a college.

Yet, as Mannoia warns, a complete focus on the relational poses some possible dangers. He writes,

...there is a 'divide' between those responsible for formal curriculum and those responsible for residence life. One staff is responsible for social development, another for faith development, another for cognitive development...²⁶

It causes a bifurcation on the campus. Too often, a residence life program is primarily focused on social development. It needs to focus on social, cognitive, ethical and faith development simultaneously. It needs to assist in transforming "the summer camp feel" and the "cruise ship experience" of the residence hall into a force that assists in the educational mission of the college. If

the institution's educational mission is to develop wise, knowledgeable, thoughtful and whole students, the collaboration between Student/Residence Life and the academic divisions is essential. A casual observer would acknowledge that students are in college to learn and that most of the cognitive development occurs in the classroom and laboratory. Reality also demonstrates that students only spend about 50 hours per week in class and in studies [if they are diligent]. Over 100 hours of discretionary time are left for sleeping, eating, playing and "hanging out." The bulk of that time is spent within the residence hall or with friends and roommates. If the implications of formal instruction are to be internalized by students, those responsible for shaping the residence halls and other campus living areas must intentionally create environments, opportunities and communities that allow for this learning to take place. My hope is that these reflections may become a primer for discussion that will provoke both residence life and academic programs to utilize, maximize and transform campus communities to assist in the goals of a Christian liberal arts education. Therefore as stated above, a campus residence life program is potentially the best-positioned group to encourage the growth of community for the educational purposes of a liberal arts college. *Soli Deo Gloria*

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I must admit that I headed out to last year's New Professionals Retreat with somewhat of a chip on my shoulder. After four years in student development, I wasn't terribly convinced that this would be a meaningful use of my time.

Boy, was I wrong!! What I found at NPR were 35 (mostly 20-30 somethings) like me who actually "got it." They "got" what I do, why I do it, and what my life is like...because their lives are just like mine!! This was an unbelievable value to each of us. I made friends and connections with people who understand me and have a heart for college students and for the Lord. I connected with people who could give me ideas, referrals and most importantly support. I now have a network of friends and colleagues all across the country who are praying for me and who are helping me through issues and questions that we face in our profession even now and for years to come.

In addition, I found 5 mid-level professional who had invested their time in making NPR a reality. They unlike me, knew all along just how valuable this would be and how important it is to train and mentor new professionals. Their transcendent ministry, attention and love blessed each of us.

Mindy Cacopardo
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