

1994

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Recommended Citation

Macy, Howard R., ""The College of Shalom"" (1994). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. Paper 195.
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Howard R. Macy

"The College of *Shalom* "

One of the major tasks and minor entertainments of life in a college is discovering meaningful ways to describe what we're doing together. What is the mission or purpose of the college? What do we hope results from the life we share? What effect should all of this have for students, for faculty and staff, for alumni, and for the world at large?

Those who think about these questions give a wide range of answers. Some eagerly defend the liberal arts as a way to raise up wise humans, thoughtful people who can be the foundation of a civil and free society. Others counter that we must prepare students for careers and nurture leaders to influence particular professions and guilds. In Christian colleges, educational leaders also insist on the importance of producing graduates who are able to serve the cause of Christ in the Church and in the world, whether in vocational ministry, in service professions, in business, or in other endeavors. Sometimes statements of purpose, underneath the elevated rhetoric, turn out to be merely silly, such as one college's "vision" statement that saw its overriding purpose as to be recognized as a better college than others nearby. Setting such pettiness aside, however, many of these sometimes competing visions can stand side by side, often helping each other in their complementarity.

In the midst of such conversations, I have often wondered whether there might be a more comprehensive or more unifying way of thinking about the life of a college, a way of holding together simply the complexity

of our common life. Is there a vision which might embrace and integrate and even transcend the worthy purposes to which college folk are often committed? As I have experimented with it, the Hebrew concept of *shalom* seems to offer such an integrative yet provocative vision.

Commonly the word *shalom* is translated simply as "peace," a meaning which, though accurate, fails to capture the richness and potential fruitfulness of the concept. At its heart, the biblical idea of *shalom* has to do with wholeness, with harmony, with balance. It speaks of health and healing, of debts paid, of promises kept and vows fulfilled. When in the Old Testament *shalom* refers to political peace, it does not point to the stand-off of mutual terror, but to reconciliation, to a harmony under God's rule in which nations convert their weapons to farm tools, close down their boot camps, and their peoples snooze on their patios without fear. (Micah 4:1-4) *Shalom* means justice for everyone, honest courts and rulers, and compassion for the vulnerable people of society. *Shalom* even means, in some biblical portions, living at peace with all of the creatures and the world itself. Ultimately, of course, *shalom* includes all people and all of creation being reconciled to God. The "peace" of *shalom* embraces wide possibilities, but it still holds a unifying thread.

The unity and fruitful variety of this theme suggest a fresh way of thinking about the mission and purpose of a Christian college. What if *shalom* were the theme of our life together in the college? In what ways would we keep saying, "*Shalom* is our profession?" What are the ways we would steadily ask, "How does or can this action, this decision, this policy, this course contribute to wholeness? How does it advance the work of *shalom*?" Broadly conceived, the idea of *shalom* would shape how and what we teach, how we govern, how we serve one another, how we live in community, how we earn and spend our money, and how we relate to the community and world outside of the college. The question, "How does this serve *shalom*?" can be asked of every aspect of college life. Consider more closely some of the possibilities, many of them proposed as guiding questions rather than settled answers.

Shalom in the Curriculum

One necessary place to ask such questions is in the curriculum. If we were to pursue *shalom* in the college, how would it affect the courses we teach? the assignments we make? the methods we use? the questions we raise? the practical applications we seek? How would it influence the patterns of general education and majors and minors? What kinds of curricular enrichment would we actively encourage?

Perhaps the most obvious way to pursue *shalom* in the curriculum is

to propose and maintain a peace studies program, as several colleges do, including my own. Such programs often creatively integrate courses from a wide array of disciplines – history, sociology, religion and philosophy, psychology, and more – with practical training and experience in skills such as mediation and conflict resolution. Potentially their contribution to *shalom* in families, schools, communities, and countries can be enormous. But peace studies programs alone scarcely begin to fulfill the vision of peace at the heart of the college's common life. We can too easily relegate *shalom* to "specialists" and fail to allow its requirements to search and shape our other courses and activities.

If *shalom* were our common theme, ideally we would always be holding up its character and possibility: this is what peace looks like and these are ways we can move toward it. As much as it is a moral commitment, nurturing peace is an exercise of the imagination. Sometimes in a climate of chaos, enmity, and violence it takes a great leap of imagination to think that peace is possible at all. It also takes imagination to grasp what peace might look like in a classroom, in a family, in a labor dispute, or among the oppressed. It takes imagination for students to consider how, in practical ways, they can order their lives, choose vocations, and live in jobs, communities, and families as agents of *shalom*. Yet together we can make such an imaginative leap through analysis and reflection in the various disciplines, through biography and story, through creative problem-solving and journaling, through service and other activities. Most of all, such a leap comes through faithfully and creatively adhering to the principles of *shalom*, not only in our teaching and learning, but also in all of our common life.

When we are tempted to dismiss such a vision as wistful or merely idealistic, we can at least balance such resignation or pessimism by considering the cost of the failure of imagination. What does it cost individuals, institutions, and cultures to think that peace is not possible? To think that justice and reconciliation and harmonious living are merely impossible ideals, that they can never really be achieved, breeds cynicism and despair which then, too easily, turn into apathy and self-interest. The failure of imagination at this point simply perpetuates the conflict, injustice, and chaos which we long to overcome.

Shalom in the Disciplines

With imagination the idea of *shalom* can penetrate how we think about content and educational process in any discipline. While I do not purport to have mastered all areas of study, let me suggest questions in several areas to illustrate how they might serve the interests of *shalom*.

Education: Do our methods of instruction and classroom manage-

ment, both modeled and taught, respect the unique value of each student? Does the curriculum include practical skills in team-building, mediation, conflict resolution, and collaborative teaching and learning?

Business: Do we consider how people may compete in business without becoming enemies? Are the business practices we teach about examined in the light of integrity, justice, and love? Are we aware of and sensitive to the impact of various business practices on individuals and society, on the earth, and especially on vulnerable people, practically the poor? Do we explore ways to apply business knowledge in order to advance justice and enable compassion? Can internships, case studies, and practica be designed so that faculty and students can experiment with applying the principles of *Shalom* in practical situations?

Writing: Does writing, as we teach it, require integrity in both form and content? Does it tell the truth about our hearts, our living, and the world around us? Does it respect readers and cherish beauty? Does the style itself possess a unity which bespeaks shalom?

Natural sciences: In what ways does our teaching of science demonstrate and prize the interrelatedness of life in the world? Does our teaching encourage and model regard for the creatures and a sense of responsibility for the thoughtful guardianship of the earth? Do we lift up the ways in which the knowledge and skills of the sciences can help reconcile humans with the earth and how they can enable healing?

Psychology: How carefully do we examine psychological theories in order to test their adequacy in describing the totality and dignity of the human person? Do the applications of psychology which we propose serve understanding and healing rather than manipulation and control? Does our research ultimately serve wholeness rather than curiosity, and does it respect the unique dignity of each subject?

Music and art: Do our artistic works and performance evoke and answer the longing for *shalom* carried in each person? Do our endeavors avoid artistic conceits which tend to conceal rather than reveal truth?

Religion and philosophy: Does our teaching about religion recognize its human significance rather than trivialize it through mere academic curiosity? Does our teaching elicit thoughtful reflection on how religion intersects with all of life? In the university, theology was once regarded as an integrative discipline called the "queen of the sciences." In something of that spirit, does our teaching of religion and philosophy seek to integrate life, commitment, and the disciplines as a model of human wholeness?

Sociology: Does our study of society and its institutions go beyond disinterested description to an empathic understanding of various groups and their needs? Do we explore practical ways to apply group processes and the dynamics of change to move toward greater justice, harmony

between groups, and specific expressions of compassion?

If *shalom* were the theme of our life together, of course, it would encompass far more than courses and curriculum. It would necessarily shape and guide all aspects of our life together. Indeed, our behaviors and lived commitments would witness more tellingly than our courses to the power and possibilities of *shalom*.

Shalom in Governing

The Old Testament vision of *shalom* includes several descriptions of rulers who fulfill its promise. They are leaders who rule fairly, concerned less for their own interests than for those of their people, watching out especially for the vulnerable ones (typically, in the Old Testament, the widows, the poor, the orphans, and the resident aliens). Such leaders make judgments on merit, not on favoritism or hearsay. They prefer service to their people rather than the pretensions and posturing of power. Through "righteousness" (doing the right thing) and steady faithfulness, they lead the way to a joyful and settled peace. This provides an apt model for leadership, even for those who are not king. In governing a campus, consider questions such as these:

- In the decision-making process, are we careful not to insulate leaders from the needs and concerns of even the weakest members of the community? Do we guard against giving an "inside track" or undue influence to some for reasons other than wisdom?
- Are individuals whose work is unacceptable dealt with honestly and respectfully, helped to grow toward sound service, or, as necessary, released with dignity and loving concern?
- Are personnel decisions made on merit rather than by personal pique, political maneuvering, or hearsay?
- Do we steadily govern for the sake of the community as a whole, avoiding setting one part of the community against another? Do we seek creative collaboration rather than competition, inviting as nearly as possible the best wisdom from all quarters of the community?
- Do we observe integrity in accounting and financial reporting, refusing to create the appearance of fiscal soundness by using "smoke and mirrors"?
- Do we steadily and imaginatively articulate the vision of *shalom* as the theme of our common life?

Shalom in Serving One Another

We serve one another in many ways on campus, as administrators, support staff, teachers, student life directors, food service personnel,

recruiters, development officers, and more. In the varied relationships this brings there are many opportunities to embody the theme of shalom. Consider:

- Do we honor and encourage among one another work patterns that maintain personal wholeness – health, balance, effective family and friendship relationships? Or do we honor those who give too much, to their own and, ultimately, our common detriment?
- Do we pay all of our employees fairly, being careful not to exact self-sacrifice through coercion or shame?
- Do we gladly serve others as we are asked and able, without begrudging them the task or exacting a price of flattery or favors owed?
- Do we treat each member of the campus community as a person of worth, regardless of task or role?
- When conflicts arise, do we actively seek to resolve them in a timely and just manner that guards each person's worth and the common good?

In the area of student life, we might consider questions like these:

- In what ways do we help students learn how to live harmoniously in residence halls and in campus activities? Are there practical opportunities for teaching and modeling? Are there established means for resolving conflicts?
- In what ways do we help students develop healthy, whole relationships as they encounter each other in friendship, work, learning, and romance?
- In what specific ways do we help students with personal histories of brokenness find healing and reconciliation, new hope and wholeness?

When we deal with issues of financial aid, registration, student accounts, and similar matters:

- Do we treat students courteously rather than curtly? Are we patient and helpful in trying to work out specific problems students bring to us?
- In what ways do we try to assure a just and equitable distribution of scholarship funds and other opportunities for assistance?
- Are we able to apply established policies consistently and compassionately, without capriciousness, callousness, or impersonal efficiency?

***Shalom* in Meeting the Non-Campus World**

If a college adopts *shalom* as its profession, it must also reach beyond its campus community to include the various ways it touches the world at large. How can the college help raise up "peace" in both ordinary and extraordinary ways? Consider:

- In recruiting students, do we represent the college and its character truthfully? Are we attentive to the prospective student's interests and concerns about college, regardless of how that may influence the student's

college choice? When they enroll at the college, do we keep the promises we have made to them?

- When raising funds, do we show genuine personal concern for those who give or might give money to the college? Or is our concern tempered by the size and likelihood of their gift? Do we help donors understand how they can use their resources to advance their own wholeness as well as advance the purposes of *shalom* in the world, even when it does not benefit the college?

- When promoting the college through news, advertising, and other public relations activities, do we present the college and its interests with integrity, neither exaggerating nor underplaying its character and achievements? Is the manner of our promotion in all respects consistent with the purposes of *shalom* ?

- In business dealings with vendors, creditors, and others, do we treat them justly and with integrity?

- When engaged with projects and organizations outside of the college, do students and college staff seek to serve the community at large in ways that are consistent with *shalom* ? Do these activities stir up the imagination for shalom in those who participate in them? In those who receive and observe this service?

- How effectively do we support, nurture, and honor alumni who try to serve the vision of shalom in the world beyond the campus? How readily do we learn from their successes and failures?

The Root of *Shalom*

It would be incomplete and unfaithful to the biblical vision of *shalom* to overlook what the Bible sees as its root, as its possibility of fulfillment. In that vision, *shalom* is both empowered by and the result of reconciliation to God. Alienation and strife between people and even between people and nature result, according to the Bible, from alienation from God. So the first and central healing, which makes possible all others, is restoring the broken relationship between people and God. Happily, God has taken the initiative to do this, according to the New Testament, through Christ, who is “our peace” and who “preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.” (Ephesians 2:14, 17)

Because the news of God’s initiative is central to the realization of “peace,” I believe that the college that is self-consciously committed to faith as a core value has a much better chance of both understanding and realizing the fruitfulness of the vision of *shalom*. On the one hand, to ignore God’s action and empowerment limits the fulfillment of this vision, even though it may continue to be a significant guide and goal. On the other hand, even where the importance of “peace with God” is gladly

recognized, we will still have to remain carefully self-examined and imaginative in working out the vision of *shalom* in all of our life together.

What if shalom were the theme of our life together in a college? In many ways it surely would integrate and confirm many of the goals and values that we now hold. But saying, "*Shalom* is our profession," might also draw us on to new areas of practical purpose and creative activity. It could help us touch the lives of individuals and communities in ways that go beyond even what we had hoped. With commitment, with the leap of imagination, and, yes, with the leap of faith, it is possible to build a college of *shalom*.