

Five Themes

It is my contention that education informed by the Lutheran tradition ought to be built around five general themes: Giftedness, Freedom, Faithful Criticism, Service/Vocation, and *Paideia*. The education provided at our colleges and universities ought to be known far and wide for the way we celebrate gifts, for the way we learn in freedom toward freedom, for the depth and engagement of our criticism, for connecting learning to doing that serves, and connecting learning to the self-becoming of the student. Most of these themes have been discussed in what precedes, so I will address each theme very briefly here.

1. *The Celebration of Gifts*

A Christian encounters all of life and all of creation as a gift. A Christian teacher, therefore, is a sharer and unwrapper of gifts: the gifts of the world or discipline or author to be studied, and the gifts each of us brings with us. There were teachers I had in college who opened the same gifts semester after semester, year after year, and took great delight in it. In some cases the gift was swamp ecology, in other cases the dialogues of Plato, cathedral architecture, the chorales of Bach, the poetry of Rilke. In each case the teachers were as excited as kids, not finding what was in there (they had a pretty good idea about that already), but at our coming to discover what was in there.

There were also teachers (sometimes the same ones) who excelled in making students see the gifts that were inside them: the gifts of language, of music, of leadership, of scholarship, of teamwork, of art. Such teachers enabled, encouraged, cajoled, critiqued, and supported students in their process of self-becoming. Then there were also teachers (again sometimes the same ones) who led their students to see their own gifts (and sometimes their handicaps) as a vocation, i.e., as a gift to be shared in service to a needy world. And so that passing on of gifts continues and continues.

The classrooms and laboratories and studios of such teachers were a potlatch, a celebration of gifts – giving, opening, receiving, and sharing. A celebration of gifts and giftedness. Each campus should be an embodiment, at least in an intellectual and spiritual sense, of what Lewis Hyde refers to as “a gift economy.”

2. *Freedom*

Understanding freedom as a consequence of grace, as another of God’s gifts, we are freed from the necessity to work out our own justification. As a consequence of this freedom there is no part of ourselves or of the human story we have to suppress in order to be pure or pious in some phony sense. This freedom should distinguish education in the Lutheran tradition from “religious education” commonly found in other traditions. Education in a Lutheran college or university should be surprisingly bold, open, multidimensional, challenging, experimental, diverse, and engaging; never frightened, closed, authoritarian, sanitized, and defensive. A religious view without freedom tends to reduce the world, to shrink it to one that confirms the opinion of the believer and does not open one to challenge. It is interesting how frequently secular education presents a reduced world as well.

The freedom is also manifest in the fact that we do things other institutions don’t seem able to manage. We teach religion, particularly Christianity, and we teach it appreciatively *and* critically. Secular institutions do not feel free to do the former, and many religious institutions are not free to do the latter. So this attitude of critical appreciation that seems so right and natural to many faculty in Lutheran institutions is very rare in the culture at large. The assumption is that if one is appreciative she is not critical, and if critical, not appreciative. This is but one more example of a Lutheran approach that is founded on what, to many, appears to be the affirmation of a paradox.

This freedom also exhibits itself in the books read, the films viewed, the questions asked, the discussions launched, the new things tried on our campuses. It should exhibit itself in the way we treat each other, in the social ultimacies and stereotypes we challenge, in the way we

regard our successes and, most particularly, in the way in which we respond to our failures. Darrell Jodock has summarized this freedom extremely well:

The divine "yes" of the gospel sets people free to search for the truth, no matter how messy it may turn out to be. Because humans have no basis for any sort of claim on God, nothing needs to be protected ... No inherited ideas or practices are exempt from critique and evaluation. Religion itself can be critiqued because it is capable of getting in the way of the gospel ... The state can be critiqued. To the distress of presidents and deans, the college itself can be critiqued. Wherever loyalty to a learned profession gets in the way of education, it can be critiqued. Every area can be investigated ... The net effect is freedom of inquiry.

There is a second dimension of freedom that has to be central to Lutheran education: educating students towards the realization of their own freedom. Thomas Merton wrote:

Life consists in learning to live on one's own, spontaneous, freewheeling: to do this one must recognize what is one's own – be familiar and at home with oneself. This means basically learning who one is, and learning what one has to offer, ... and then learning how to make that offering valid. The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world ... A superficial freedom to wander aimlessly here to there, to taste this or that, to make a choice of distractions ... is simply a sham. It claims to be a freedom of "choice" when it has evaded the basic task of discovering who it is that chooses. The function of the university is, then, first of all to help the student discover himself: to recognize himself, and to identify who it is that chooses.

Freedom is more than just not being prevented or limited, though that is how an eighteen-year-old just liberated from her parents is likely to think of it. It is also more than just "doing what I like." Even an addict may have that counterfeit of freedom yet to be completely unfree. Freedom is choosing and acting consistently with who one really is. Until then we are dependent on what others tell us we are, and in this world we are surely puppets being manipulated by invisible strings. Freedom is not easy. It certainly is not as easy as moving away from home, or having the funds to support one's fantasies or habits. It requires some hard learning, a learning that finally reveals to us who we are and what we are called to do.

For Lutherans freedom is intimately linked to grace and to vocation. These three rightly overlap each other. When freedom is pursued apart from identity or identity apart from vocation we get counterfeits of each concept. Since all three of these ideas are at the heart of the Lutheran vision, Lutheran colleges and universities have something quite distinctive to offer students: an education toward freedom that is also an education toward self-identity that is also an education toward vocation. No secular university, to my knowledge, makes such a claim. Nor would it occur to most faith-related colleges to do so either.

3. *Faithful Criticism*

Being critical is one of the manifestations of freedom. Christians are freed to serve the world by being critical and by challenging all human claims to ultimacy. We are called, in other words, to recognize idols when we see them. This is not an easy thing to do because most of us have been "captured" by some agenda our society has laid on us. We tend not to recognize the prisons we willingly live inside. Certainly materialism in all its modes is one such idol in our society. How often have we felt the temptation to believe that we are valuable for what we have, for those things we call "our possessions"? How frequently do all other concerns take a back seat to economic progress? How tempting is the idea that having more will bring us happiness and fulfillment? For how many of us is success defined by income and consumption? David Orr confronts this issue boldly in his book, *Earth in Mind*:

The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, story-tellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage ... And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture defines it.

The question arises, where does the moral courage come from to challenge the pervasive god of success: Certainly secular education has no reason to do so.

So many students are convinced that education serves only to get a job, and that a job serves the end of copious and conspicuous consumption. Why is this so widely believed? For many it is believed because it is a story convincingly told daily in all the media. We are

informed about what human excellence is mainly by people who are trying to sell us something. For many students this is their story because they have never heard any other story and because they have never heard anyone challenge it, much less embody an alternative.

We need to be asking, "What are those beliefs almost universally held in our culture? What are those notions that demand our loyalty and obedience?" Then we also need to ask, "Where do these things come from? What do they depend on? How well founded are they? Who benefits from our obedience? Who is harmed thereby? Why are we tempted to follow them? What do we fear will happen to us if we don't?" All these normally very frightening questions we are freed to ask because none of these things have ultimacy for us. And the diligent pursuit of these critical, yet faithful, questions is part of our service to a world in need.

4. *Service/Vocation*

Service is an implication of each of the preceding themes. Having realized our own gifts we use them in service. Sometimes that service is helping others to realize their own gifts. Having been *freed from* bondage to the service of idols we are *freed to* serve the neighbour in need. Being critical of the claims to ultimacy our societies and their institutions make on us we are able to see human need in a new way and risk engagement that frees others.

Learning in a Lutheran setting should always have this practical piece, the place where theory is connected to practice, the place where classroom work is connected to the problems of real people in a real place. We need this because it brings its own critical agenda, asking, "Does it really work? Does it actually help those who most need it? What does it sound like communicated to real people in need?" We also need the service dimension because it provides an opportunity for those engaged in it to come to know themselves, their prejudices, their fears, their deepest dreams. That is why it is not uncommon to hear students comment, "I learned more in that service project than I learned in all my major courses combined."

The third reason for connecting service to learning is because it is a source of hope. We will never solve the whole problem of poverty, but we can be kept from despair if we can help just a few kids overcome the handicaps that poverty would otherwise inflict on them. We cannot make the problems of racism and classism disappear, but we may show people in particular cases that someone cares enough about them to make an effort. A purely theoretical education produces optimists and pessimists. Service connected learning creates people who try. My friend Sig Royspern coined the phrase, "as useless as a convention of optimists." I would rather have two or three who are willing, in spite of the size of the problem, to make an effort that serves. That's where hope is connected to vocation.

5. *The Paideia Paradigm*

The word *paideia* comes from the Greek word for child, *pais*, and means roughly the same as nurture, intentional education. Werner Jaeger and several others have employed the term more generally to mean "the formative process of human personality and character." Peter Hodgson more recently has used the term to mean a process of education (in the old Latin sense of *e-ducere*, to lead forth toward wisdom and freedom. And bell hooks has employed the term to talk about a concern to teach "that respects and cares for the souls of students." I use the term here to talk about a kind of education that takes the connection between knowing, teaching, and human becoming seriously.

- It is a commitment to recognizing the learner as a whole person.
- It is a commitment to facilitating the human development of persons.
- It is a commitment to exploring the larger, human-related dimensions of our knowing.
- It is a commitment to relating knowing to the larger issues of living in the world.