

Educating for Justice and the Liberal Arts Tradition

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When asked to address the question, “Is it appropriate for higher education to educate for justice?” I can only respond as a Christian scholar who works in the context of Christian higher education.

In the context of Christian higher education, it seems to me self-evident that the answer to that question is “yes,” for scripture everywhere summons Christians to live lives that are transformed in radical ways, that reach out in radical service to other human beings, and that serve the goals of justice and mercy in the world.

Micah is a notable case in point. “He has showed you, O man, what is good,” Micah writes. “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

The New Testament picks up on these very same themes. Thus, when Jesus defined his own vocation, he did so in terms of radical service to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,” Jesus said, “because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Not only did Jesus define his own vocation in terms of radical service, he also took great pains to explain the nature of the vocation his followers should embrace. Rick Marrs, an Old Testament scholar at Pepperdine, tells this story well and notes along the way how ironic it was that

while on his way to Jerusalem to give his life for humanity, Jesus’ own followers argue about their ‘vocation’ in the coming kingdom of God. . . . They talk in terms of self-promotion and appropriate reward for work rendered. They are consumed with what honor, benefits, and security will come to them for the successful accomplishment of their tasks. In that context, Jesus responds:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

In his magnificent but little known book, *Doing the Truth in Love*, Michael J. Himes helps us understand this point from the perspective of the last judgment. He writes,

The New Testament has a great deal about the end of the world or the end of this era of history, but there is not a syllable describing any criteria for the last judgment except Matthew 25:31-46. And notice what the only criterion of the last judgment is. There is not a word about whether you belonged to the church, not a word about whether you were baptized, not a syllable about whether you ever celebrated the Eucharist, not a question about whether you prayed, nothing at all about what creed you professed or what you knew about doctrine or theology. Indeed, there is nothing specifically religious at all. Not one doctrine, not one specifically religious act of worship or ritual turns out to be relevant to the criterion for the last judgment. The only criterion for that final judgment, according to Matthew 25, is, “Did you give yourself away to those who needed you” (51-52)?

It must be clear by now that Christian higher education can scarcely call itself “Christian” in any meaningful sense unless it educates for justice.

But now we must ask another question, and it is this: On what ground can we claim that education for justice makes for meaningful and, indeed, for legitimate *education*? Education for justice clearly fulfills a *Christian* mandate, but does it fulfill an *educational* mandate?

To respond to this question, I want to ground my argument squarely in my understanding of the liberal arts. More pointedly, I want to ask: Is there a connection—even an intrinsic connection—between the liberal arts and the goal of educating for justice?

I would contend that there is, and that the common thread that ties the liberal arts to questions of justice is the question of meaning.

The question of meaning is one that all of our students—indeed, all human beings—inevitably ask. We must ask the question of meaning for one simple reason: the fact of death makes our lives seem so absurd. Put another way, the fact that we will inevitably die forces each of us to ask if there is meaning in the midst of such apparent meaninglessness.

It seems to me that the question of meaning lies at the very heart of the liberal arts tradition. If purely professional studies ask *how*, the liberal arts ask *why*? If purely technical studies ask about *technique*, the liberal arts ask about the *meaning* of technology and, indeed, about the *meaning* of work itself.

But what connection might there possibly be between the question of meaning and the question of justice? And why would one move from a consideration of the meaning of life to dedicate one’s self to serving the neighbor in just and merciful ways, or to the creation of a just society?

The link between the question of meaning and the question of justice can be found in the finitude we share with all other human beings. Once I come to terms with my own

finitude, with the fact of my own mortality, with the fact of my own inevitable death, at that point I begin to ask serious questions about the meaning of life. And at that very point, I begin to realize that the meaning of *my* life is tied inextricably to the meaning of life itself and to the meaning of the lives of every other human being. When I make that discovery, I am suddenly in a position to empathize with the finitude of others—their suffering, their brokenness, and, indeed, their own inevitable deaths.

Not everyone will move from an awareness of finitude, suffering, and death to commit himself or herself to radical service in the interest of a just society, but many will. One such person was Morrie Schwartz whose story by now is legendary. Morrie was the kind and gentle professor who discovered in his sixties that he had ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease, a profoundly debilitating disease for which there is no cure, that wastes the nerves and the muscles, and that inevitably results in death. The book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, is essentially the story of how one man found meaning in service to the neighbor in the very face of his own certain death.

And how would he serve? Mitch Albom, the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, explains that Morrie “would make death his final project, the center point of his days. Since everyone was going to die, he could be of great value, right? He could be research. A human textbook. . . . Morrie would walk that final bridge between life and death and narrate the trip.”

The most profound advice that Morrie gave in the hour of his own demise was this: “*Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.*” And for Morrie, living meaningfully in the face of death meant service to other human beings. Morrie explained that against the backdrop of our inevitable deaths, money, success, and self-indulgence is finally empty. There is one thing that lasts, Morrie said, and that one thing was loving kindness rendered to other human beings. “*Learn how to die,*” Morrie said, “*and you learn how to live.*” (9, 10, 83, 124-125)

Chaim Potok's remarkable book, *The Chosen*, offers an additional illustration of how the question of meaning can provide a powerful link between an affirmation of our finitude, on the one hand, and a commitment to service and justice, on the other. There Potok tells the story of Reuven Malter whose father, once the horrors of the holocaust had become clear, was now driving himself relentlessly—making speeches and raising money—on behalf of the creation of a Jewish state.

One night Mr. Malter came home especially tired and worn. He had a bad cold, his third in five months. His voice cracked. His face was “pale and gaunt.” And “his eyes were watery.”

On this particular night, Mr. Malter's condition prompted Reuven to say to his father,
 “You're not taking care of yourself, you know. Your voice sounds awful.”

[Mr. Malter] sighed “It is a bad cold,” he said.

“Does Dr. Grossman know you’re working so hard?”

“Dr. Grossman worries a little too much about me,” he said, smiling.

“Are you going for another checkup soon?”

“Soon,” he said. “I am feeling fine, Reuven. You worry like Dr. Grossman.

Worry better about your schoolwork. I am fine.”

“How many fathers do I have?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything, but he blinked his eyes a few times.

“I wish you’d take it a little easy,” I said. . . .

My father didn’t seem to have heard me. He sat on the bed, lost in thought. We were quiet for a long time. Then he stirred and said softly, “Reuven, do you know what the rabbis tell us God said to Moses when he was about to die?”

I stared at him. “No,” I heard myself say.

“He said to Moses, ‘You have toiled and labored, now you are worthy of rest.’” He paused for a moment, as if considering his next words carefully, then continued. “Human beings do not live forever, Reuven. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye, if we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be asked what value is there to human life. . . .” He paused again, his eyes misty now, then went on. “I learned a long time ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant. Do you understand what I am saying? A man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life. It is hard work to fill one’s life with meaning. That I do not think you understand yet. A life filled with meaning is worthy of rest. I want to be worthy of rest when I am no longer here. Do you understand what I am saying?” [He paused again, then continued.] “I did not want to sound morbid. I only wanted to tell you that I am doing things I consider very important now. If I could not do these things, my life would have no value” (203-5).

Here we have a marvelous story of a man whose profound sense of finitude drove him to find meaning by giving his life to the cause of justice as he understood that cause.

Slowly it becomes clear, I think, that the liberal arts, focused as they are on questions of meaning, are linked inescapably to questions of service, mercy, and justice. Jesus perhaps put it best when he said, quite simply, “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it,

and whoever loses his life will preserve it.” Or as Morrie observed so wisely, “Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.”

Works Cited

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