

## Venerating Our Youth: How Much Admiration is Too Much?

Special feature by Father James P. Shea, President, University of Mary in Bismarck

The English writer G.K. Chesterton called education “simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” Those of us who serve in colleges and universities are right to concern ourselves with quality career preparation and great job placement for our students. We do pass along skill and competence. But we should also pass along “soul,” and education falls short unless it attends carefully to this other, less tactical aspect of teaching and learning. To serve our students well, we begin by acknowledging that each one has an inner life, an arena within where the struggle for purpose and meaning takes place.

This requires a kind of wakefulness, especially on the part of those colleges and universities who understand the formation and education of the whole person - body, mind, and spirit - as fundamental to our mission. We approach our students with a concern for the societal and personal pressures they face, striving to understand the particular challenges young people now grapple with in both the world outside and the world within. These young people are more than consumers to be analyzed and courted for the benefit of our recruitment and retention goals. In that spirit, I offer just a few thoughts about one of the more unsettling trends in the way we tend to think and talk about this age group and their education: a growing culture of intense individualism.

The students now headed for the classrooms and laboratories of our colleges and universities have as much to bring as any generation. They are bright, talented, and full of promise. They are eager to learn. But in my experience as their teacher, chaplain, and now as a university president, there is also an anxiety which hangs over them, an uncertainty or grief of some kind. It is difficult to name and hard sometimes hard to see, but I believe it to be unmistakably real and derived from this culture of individualism.

It’s foolhardy to generalize, but I think it could be said that most of our students today have received from their parents and teachers an upbringing characterized by remarkable nurturing and encouragement. From the very beginning, they have been told how special they are. Such affirmation is beautiful and tremendously well-intentioned, but it sometimes has a darker effect. I could illustrate this in a hundred ways, but one memory springs readily to mind. A 17-year-old once showed me a card he had received from his father. It read, “Son, you will never know how much I admire and respect you. You are my hero.” I’m not really sure that a young man knows what to do with something like that. Such words may support and flatter him at one level, but they create unrest in another part of him. If the adults in your life admire you with such intensity, whom are you supposed to admire? How did you get to be so amazing anyway? And maybe you’ve been wondering about this for a long time: when you’re nine and your parents take off a week of work to drive you to a soccer tournament five states away, a part of you might genuinely wonder if they don’t have anything else to do. The other part of you feels this anxious pressure to perform in what was supposed to be a fun game among kids.

In fact, such intensity of individual encouragement from teachers and parents can have an unforeseen negative effect. Because of the way we are put together at the level of the soul, we can be more deeply consoled by the reassurance that we belong to a stable and meaningful community than by individual assurances that we are somehow terrific and special. For when you are made to feel exquisitely unique without being made to feel like you belong to something greater than yourself, you are left pretty much all alone. A genuine experience of community and family serves to cultivate healthy self-worth more effectively than a campaign to nurture a young person’s ego.

In some troubling ways, the higher education community has taken up the chorus. We know, and the market research tells us, that our young people have been conditioned by and are attuned to aggressive encouragement and affirmation. And so this shows up in recruiting mailings and advertising campaigns. Along major interstates and highways are billboards with clever, individualist messaging: “You Can Do It All,” “The College of Me,” “YOUiversity.” The approach is to flatter and stroke the young ego.

On one hand, it’s hard to blame an institution for taking this approach. Individualist praise is effective with today’s young people; it speaks to them. But it doesn’t speak to the best in them. And it exploits that which is already vulnerable. This rising generation is more “connected” than ever before, with technology delivering both entertainment and education directly to individuals in amazing new ways. But these changes have also left them with a profound experience of social isolation, which then often gives rise to an inchoate yearning to realign the focus and energy of their lives to something greater than themselves. Assisting them to do this, to shift the direction of their innate search for meaning from themselves to the greater good, is one of the most critical services a college or university can provide for our students. And such efforts will have a profound effect upon their long-term happiness and their future leadership potential.

Rather than telling our students relentlessly that there’s no limit to what they can do, that they should shoot for the stars and follow their dreams, we might acknowledge that often a young person has no idea what he or she wants. That’s one of the more charming things about being young. And, after all, questions about their own dreams and what they want don’t adequately address the incredible potential of every human life. For our students are capable of so

much more than just their own contentment. Instead, we might find ways to send a different message, to say something like this: “You were placed in this world by love to do something of tremendous importance and value, and your happiness and the joy you bring to others depends urgently upon discovering your calling and purpose. Your life is not all about you. It’s your life, yes it is, but it’s not about you. In the end, the true meaning of your life will become clear only when you find a way to give yourself away.”

“It’s not about you.” Believe it or not, my experience is that young people are incredibly relieved and grateful to receive that message. It’s liberating finally to hear that the meaning and purpose of life can be sought and discovered by engaging deeply in the lives of others, not just fabricated in the loneliness and noise of one’s own mind. A self-seeking life quickly degenerates into one empty thing after another. But a life of self-gift and generous service brings true experiences of friendship and community, the promise of genuine fulfillment, and a sense of profound inner peace. In a culture of intense individualism, where will our young people hear that their life is not about them? Someone should speak up. As today’s colleges and universities participate in the passing of the soul of our society to a new generation, we can meet this challenge with a strong and hopeful voice, a voice committed to the genuine happiness of our students and to the very best of our own proud heritage.

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Father James P. Shea, originally from Hazelton, North Dakota, assumed the presidency of the University of Mary on July 1, 2009. He began his undergraduate work at Jamestown College, and then entered the seminary for the Diocese of Bismarck, earning a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree / pontifical licentiate in philosophy at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He continued his education at the North American College at the Vatican, studying theology at the Gregorian and Lateran universities in Rome. Father Shea is also an alumnus of the Institutes for Higher Education at the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University. He has worked with Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity at the Gift of Peace AIDS Hospice, taught religion at two inner-city elementary schools in Washington, D.C., and in Rome served as chaplain at Bambino Gesù Children’s Hospital and the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas. Following his ordination, Father Shea was an associate pastor in Bismarck and Mandan, and chaplain and instructor at St. Mary’s Central High School in Bismarck. Most recently, Father Shea served as pastor to parishes in Killdeer and Halliday, and taught at Trinity High School in Dickinson. Deeply committed to Catholic education, he has been an inspirational teacher and mentor to students in the Diocese of Bismarck. Father Shea currently serves on the National Advisory Council to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

