

Education for “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart”

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In the year 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated; Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique; Iron Man made his debut in Marvel comics; dogs and fire hoses attacked civil right marchers in Birmingham; the zip code was introduced; and deliberations were underway for the introduction of the Hanover Plan. It was a time when our society was exploring new and sometimes radical ideas, and it was in this context that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave particularly wise advice to those who would shape the nation and the world in a book of sermons with the title The Strength to Love.

While Dr. King may be better known for his “I Have a Dream Speech” made in that same year, within The Strength to Love is a sermon that I have returned to and taught repeatedly for most of my career as a college professor and administrator. I have also recommended it to others and advocated for its inclusion in a required freshman seminar. In that sermon, I have found and sought to share with others what I want the ultimate outcomes to be for a liberal arts education. King’s title for the sermon may say it all. The first chapter and the first sermon in that book bear the title “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart.”

King’s biblical text for the sermon was from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 10, verse 16-- “Be ye wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” In this section of Matthew, Jesus is warning his disciples about the perils they will face when he sends them out into the world. The language of the biblical text is almost apocalyptic, warning of hardship and persecution.

By 1963, King himself was no stranger to hardship and persecution. He had been jailed repeatedly, was regularly threatened, and had his house bombed. His opponents on one end of

the political spectrum branded him a communist and a destroyer of American ideals, and his other opponents were increasingly convinced that he was not radical enough, labeling him an “uncle Tom,” a sell-out, or even worse. It was in that context that King, drawing only loosely on the scripture, claimed that the work ahead—the work ahead against racism, poverty and violence--could only be accomplished by those who combine seemingly opposite attributes. King named these a tough mind and a tender heart.

A tough mind, said King, was the opposite of soft mindedness. A soft mind is easily manipulated; a soft mind always fears change; a soft mind pre-judges situations and in so doing is prejudiced. In contrast a tough mind thinks critically, analyzes facts before making decisions, and refuses to take anything--including religion or political ideology--at face value. In perhaps my favorite sentence from the sermon, King states, “A nation or civilization that continues to produce soft minded men purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan.”

But King is also fearful about what a tough mind alone will do to a person. He fears a “cold and detached” rationality and the experience of being so attuned to facts and details that individuals are depersonalized. And so he insists that a tough mind must be joined by a tender heart. To be tough minded and hard hearted is to be a monster, incapable of love and friendship, possessing the intellectual power to do great good or great harm but with no moral compass for guidance.

Together, says King, a tough mind and a tender heart are powerful; they are effective; and they have the ability to transform people and communities towards a greater good. King saw this juxtaposition as essential in his fight against segregation and legalized racism. He also believed it was a deep religious truth, and I would push it further to say that it was for King a philosophy of life.

Members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, students, alumni, honored guests as well as my family and friends, I am greatly honored to accept the call to be the 16th president of Hanover College. I have accepted this call because, I believe, my vision of an education for a tough mind and a tender heart is also woven deeply into the history and mission of Hanover, and I also believe this vision has enduring value in animating and guiding the work of the college in the future. Without question, we live in a challenging time for liberal arts education and small liberal arts colleges, but I also have every confidence that Hanover will thrive and excel as we build upon the foundation laid by those before us.

When our founder John Finley Crowe crossed the Ohio River from his native South, he combined a tough mind and a tender heart, knowing that he would need to be on free soil to advance the abolitionist cause. He could have stood on this very point, peering back across the river, and observed slaves working in bondage to their masters. In 1833 when James Blythe was inaugurated as the first president of this college he described in his own inaugural address the intellectual advances of his day and the need for their continued development. He affirmed the need for tough minded people to leave the college and go into the world. But near the conclusion of his address, he also affirmed the tender heart, stating, "We hold it to be a sound principle, that the college which does not make the cultivation of the heart a primary object had better never have been founded. Such will prove a curse to the world" Instead, Hanover College has existed for almost two centuries not as a curse to the world but as a blessing, and this college continues to bless the world by sending out graduates who have developed tough minds and tender hearts through their education here.

Neither critical thinking nor moral formation are easy today, and they may be harder now than in the time of John Finely Crowe or James Blythe. Critical thinking can become a mirror that we hold up to ourselves and our decisions, easily convincing ourselves and others that our prejudices are well thought and that our decisions are based on facts even when they are not. Schooling—whether it be preparatory work up to the 12th grade or even higher education—is not a guaranteed inoculation against lazy thinking and soft-mindedness. Too much of schooling is focused on answering rather than questioning; too much focus is on memorization instead of problem-solving; and too much focus is on dismantling into parts and not enough attention is given to creativity and the building of something new. The traditions of liberal learning and critical thinking run deep in the West, stretching back at least to the questions Socrates asked of his Athenian pupils and his insistence that they question the accepted wisdom and traditions of the day, but we seldom use that same critical questioning to examine the traditions of education that we have inherited. We think we are honoring tradition when we teach the same things and the same ways as we were taught them, but we most honor the past when we think critically and make thoughtful decisions about what to value, what to improve and what to set aside.

To speak about the education of the heart is also contested—by those who do not see it as the role of education, by those who fear indoctrination, and by those who rightfully challenge whose values should be valued. But no education is truly value-free. We express our values through the courses we teach because we teach those courses rather than others; we express our values by the questions we ask and by those we do not; we express our values by the ways we engage our students in conversation with us and with each other, by their engagement in the community, by their connections to the broader world. We teach our values through our coaching on the field and court, our mentoring in and out of the classroom, and in our holistic

approach to student development. Our students are not just brains on legs, and so our athletics programs, student activities and residence life experience support our mission in essential ways.

The formation of a tender heart and a tough mind is only possible in relationship, and so pedagogy and our very ways of knowing are different here. We can enter into relationship with one another as fellow learners and into relationship with what we study or practice, or we can be distant from both, remaining “objective.” Sociologist Parker Palmer has argued that what he names as “objectivism” is the hidden curriculum in most schooling. To be in relationship is highly subjective and allows us to be open to conversion and personal change, but we can also “want to know in (objectivist) ways that allow us to convert the world” rather than ourselves, to manipulate the world and other people for our personal benefit and as a means to power or advantage. How we come to know thus shapes what we know and why that knowledge is valuable. A tough mind is not formed one way and then a tender heart another. They go hand in hand in a holistic approach to learning as a transformative relationship.

By reframing the mission of liberal arts education as transformative relationships that form of tough minds and tender hearts, I also seek to challenge the divide between so-called liberal arts and professional study. In this dichotomy academic programs like education, engineering, computer science, and business are contrasted with history, English, chemistry and mathematics. However, if we see Hanover’s purpose and pedagogy joining the head and heart, we may come to understand that we have made for ourselves a false choice in these old debates. Determining the liberal arts identity of an institution by the “what” of the curriculum--what the subjects are and how prominent that may be--begins the discussion of liberal learning with the wrong premise. Ultimately, the defining characteristics of Hanover should not be the “what” of the curriculum but the “why,” or the purpose, and the “how,” or pedagogy of our collegium.

Almost 30 years old, Bruce Kimball's groundbreaking history of liberal education illuminated this point. In Orators and Philosophers, Kimball describes two traditions of liberal learning, indicated by the book's title. The philosophers--with roots in Athens and guided by the Enlightenment--focus on learning for its own sake and ultimately formed the modern research university to advance their ideals. The philosophical tradition defines the liberal arts as the "freeing arts" suitable for a free people and the free pursuit of knowledge with rationality, skepticism, tolerance and egalitarianism among its crucial values; Kimball names it the "liberal-free ideal." The tradition of the orators with its roots in Rome and then later the Protestant Reformation focuses on learning for the good and service of society. The orators understand the liberal arts as that set of knowledge, skills and values necessary for the civic good, for vocation broadly understood. While there are certainly overlaps, the orators' ideals largely shaped the denominationally formed, small liberal arts college, but since the early 20th century the values of the philosophers as well as the approach and divisions of the research university have consistently sought to infiltrate, displacing the liberal arts tradition of the orators and seeking to define the liberal arts within a narrow set of arts and sciences disciplines.

But if we stand with the orators—as I think we must--the civic purposes and relational pedagogies of liberal learning become much more important than what is to be studied. For the orators, the liberal arts has room for history, biology, business or athletic training as well as for a general education program including the works of both Plato and Michael Porter. It is an education for tough minds and tender hearts that prepares students for service in the world. In the Reformed theological tradition that shaped Hanover, we can say that it is an education for vocation—a calling. An important part of that service can be through one's employment, but a Hanover education must equip students not only to make a living but also to make a difference as

leaders and individuals of character. Hanover is and will continue to be a place where callings are heard and where callings are responded to, where young men and women are transformed so that they might—with tough minds and tender hearts—become agents of transformation in the world—in their workplaces, in their communities, and in the natural environment and global society that connect us all.

We send our graduates into this world, and as educators and as an educational institution we exist in it as well. And so we must be a college that not only propagates an education for tough minds and tender hearts, but we must be a college of tough minds and tender hearts. The cultural and economic forces around us are threatening, and Hanover can easily be seen as a lamb amidst wolves. Too easily nostalgia and sentimentality might paralyze us and allow us to be devoured. Because of our tender hearts, we can become disillusioned when we fail to practice or fail to achieve our ideals. We can also turn the tough mind against the tender heart to identify hypocrisy, inconsistency, and failure. We are constantly challenged by ourselves and others about how we can hold tight and continue to seek our highest ideals when we know already that we will fail to achieve them. How then do we ensure that the perfect does not become the opponent of the good, an enemy of the realistic, and a threat to the possible? Cynicism, anger, and resentment are caustic forces that eat away at both our hearts and our minds, and they can devour the institution and systems we attempt to build.

I believe a tough mind and a tender heart guard against utopian expectations just as they hold up the unrealistic ideals that we should always be seeking. A tough mind and a tender heart foster hope—not a glib optimism that everything is going to be OK (it won't), not a cynicism that says that I should take care of myself because there is nothing else to believe in (there is),

not a utopian fantasy that we will find or craft a perfect learning community (we can't), and not a despair that nothing can be done to bring about improvement or change (it is possible).

When I next stand in front of a crowd on this spot, it will be graduation day. Graduation is an occasion when we celebrate hope. We celebrate promise. We celebrate what is yet to come. We see in our graduates all of these things, and that is why it is hard not to leave graduation smiling. While today no diplomas will be distributed and no tassels will be moved, I want this day too to be a day of hope. It is a day to celebrate and remember the great hope of our founder who began our institution with a vision and a small log cabin; it is a day to remember the hopes of alumni—alive and departed--who left our bluff on the Ohio to make a difference in the world; it is a day to remember the hopes of our current students who are just hearing the callings that will lead them into the world; and it is a day to remember all of our shared hopes for Hanover College, its vocation today, and what it might yet become.

At the conclusion of his inaugural address in 1833 James Blythe offered a prayer, and today I make it my own as I too accept the call to be the president of Hanover College: He said, "I pray that God may so enlighten and strengthen me, that I may neglect no duty, nor ever make a covenant with sin or error." And to those words I add this: I pray that God will grant us all the tough minds and tender hearts we will need to prepare Hanover College for its next two hundred years.

Thank you.

References

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