

Good People, Bad Institutions

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Genesis 9:8-11

Matthew 10: 34-39

4 Ephesians 1-7: 11

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This morning I want to talk about a dilemma we face as highly educated Americans—our worship of individual autonomy and our aversion to the moral ambiguity of institutions. Institutions—families, religion, law, medicine, and even higher education; those basic social structures that define how we relate to one another—are presumed to be “bad” because these structures inevitably impose obligations on individuals. Whenever there is a conflict between those institutional obligations and individual perception of goodness, modern Americans tend to blame institutions as the obstacle to individual goodness.

In this sermon, speaking as a person who teaches medical ethics, as an administrator of this particular institution, and as a father and husband, I want to suggest that we must find a way of assuming individual responsibility for the institutional arrangements in which we find ourselves embedded. I want to suggest that we must have a way of striving to build “good” institutions—human arrangements that can serve limited but nonetheless noble and worthwhile purposes in ways that affirm goodness in ourselves and in each other.

This is a particularly difficult problem for those of us who call ourselves Christian because Western traditions of Christianity have led us to believe that our personal moral purity may be contaminated by engaging the moral ambiguity that any human institution inevitably entails. I would like to suggest that those of us who call ourselves professors along with students aspiring for a place in our overly professionalized world, might start to develop a new idea of professional ethics grounded in the notion of covenant—an ideal of connectedness—rather than in the idea of contract that I think has come to underlie most of our thinking about education.

First, let me tell you a little about the origins of this talk. Last spring, during the most hectic of days, I was asked to give a talk to a student honor society. I decided to ask myself what I remember as the enduring features of the sixties, when I was a college student, and how those differed from the nineties. I recall the idealism of the civil rights movement, the early part of the campaign “against nuclear weapon testing”. And yet when I look at the heritage of those years and its effects upon the children and young adults of today, I see some ironies that I think stem from the deeply ingrained American sense of perfectionism that drove the political action and protest of the sixties.

How is it, for instance, that a generation that thought that desegregating the public schools was a top national priority, now sends its own children to private schools and suburban schools? I was actually present at the first demonstration to “desegregate” the Boston Public schools in the summer of 1963. Now, when I see that the schools of Boston and most other cities have become not only more racially segregated, but also less equipped to educate their students, I look back and ask whether my individual protest made any real difference. Why is it that we called Moynihan’s report on “Negro Family” in 1965 “racist” when he tried to point out changes in family structure among African-Americans, when we now accept the single parent family as a feature in the lives of most of today’s children, irrespective of race?

When I ask these questions, what I think I am seeing in my generation—the generation of the sixties—and perhaps all Americans—is a kind of moral perfectionism that did not allow us to ask questions about the basic nature of institutions that were creating

our social problems. Back then our sense of social responsibility included a sense of connectedness only to those individuals who shared our ideas.

In this sermon, I would like to suggest that we cannot be “good”, at least in the Christian sense, until we take individual responsibility for the goodness of the basic institutions in which we are all embedded. Until we realize, in this time of Lent, that we are not Christ, called to forty days in the wilderness, alone, but sinful humans called to find goodness in our interactions with fellow humans as we search for God’s grace and light in our imperfect human institutions.

It is in this spirit that I want to talk with you this morning about the need to build good institutions. Although higher education is the institution that brings us together in this Cornell setting, I want to look at some lessons we can learn from some other institutions that are important to the way we live together: the world of medicine, and the family.

I. Nursing Homes

A major and yet frequently neglected institution is the nursing home, which combines medicine and the family. Nursing homes are a source of guilt and fear for most Americans who are relatively well off and healthy. The fear comes from the images we hold of ourselves as autonomous adults, grown beyond the stage of childhood when we needed care and custody. So, while we sit around knowing that we and our parents are likely to live long lives that will probably end in infirmity and decay, we have difficulty finding a good social response.

We Americans are afraid of being in the position where other human beings must care for us. We want longevity, and we look to modern medicine to provide us with longer lives. But we are not prepared to take the necessary steps to deal with the dark side of longevity—the fact that more and more people are going to live to the point of infirmity and will need humane institutions to care for them.

We are afraid to even ask the question of what kind of institutional arrangements are needed to care for persons who are permanently infirmed by either old age, accident, or genetic or metabolic deficiency. We postulate that “the family” will take care of its elderly members without considering that we probably mean that the daughter or the daughter-in-law will provide care. We are not looking carefully enough at the changing economic and social patterns of family life in this country and the rest of the Western world. If we did, we would see that increasingly those who we expect to care—usually women—have moved into the work force and are being presented with a conflict between their own and their children’s economic and social welfare, and the welfare of the aging parent or in-law.

We need to come to grips with the fact that we need institutional living arrangements—nursing homes—and we ought to set about making sure that these are good institutions. I am not talking about the bureaucratic and legal arrangements. These are important, but they are secondary to what makes a good institution.

Some of you may know the work of Scott Peck, the author of *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. Peck's latest book and first novel, *A View from the Window*, offers a vision of what a good nursing home could be. Of course, there is dying in nursing homes; but in Peck's view there is also sensuality and sexuality, there are important life truths found in reconciling oneself to one's true relationship with sons and daughters. In short there is love—a love of life without a worship of life that is quite inspiring.

To be good, an institution must have a clear and noble purpose. I am not sure what the “good” purpose of a nursing home is, but the demographics of our society — the fact that more and more people are living longer, and therefore there will more adults who need care—make it imperative that we start to think about this issue now, if only to prepare ourselves and our children for forty years from now when people my age—the so called “baby boom” generation —will most likely be unable to care for themselves. I do not believe our goal should be to “Live long enough to get revenge on your children”,— to become the care-receiver rather than care-giver. Rather I believe we ought to start to lead lives that are models of caring for ourselves and our children so that we might collectively work out honest solutions to the new problems that the institution of modern medicine is bringing us.

II. Higher Education

One outcome of thinking about nursing homes—about how institutions affect the quality of the end of our lives—is to help us understand the importance of looking at the institutions that affect our lives now. For most of us here today the main such institution is higher education.

As a teacher and an administrator, I am often struck by that fact that we have lost our way in higher education. Once highly revered, universities are now under attack from external and internal forces. Books with such provocative titles as: *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*; *Killing The Spirit: Higher Education in America*; and *The University: An Owner's Manual* have become best sellers in recent years. Less well known, but equally provocative is *The Moral Collapse of the University*, by Bruce Wilshire. I recently had the opportunity to comment on a talk that Professor Wilshire gave here at Cornell and I want to share with you some of my own thoughts about what is wrong with universities within the context of trying to understand how to make them good or better institutions.

When I think about what is wrong with higher education, I think not about the curriculum or excessive student drinking, frequent targets from critics, but about the university's underlying values, or in this setting, its spirit. One of our biggest problems is that we fail to see universities as institutions with limited purposes where conflicts must be resolved in accordance with a set of evolving institutional values. Central to this failure are two fundamental issues: our view of students, and our view of truth.

First, With Regard to students:

As we, like most modern secular men and women, have lost our sense of certainty about our values, along with our ability to have discourse about our confusion, we have increasingly seen our students as “consumers” or “customers”. Let me give you one example.

First, as I mentioned in my comments to Professor Wilshire’s talk, we have developed a kind of contractual mode for our teaching. Many of us on the faculty seem to feel that a syllabus must be a legalistic document that spells out work expectations and how much each portion of the work will count towards the grade. There are some very good reasons for making a syllabus clear in terms of workload and grading procedures, such as to help students make choices about courses; but the idea of a contract for a grade pervades much of our thinking and consequently our students thinking. Another approach to the vexing problem of grading might be to ask ourselves 1) is the contract model of education appropriate; and 2) what are we doing to create a community of learning conducive to a different conception of the roles of teacher and the student?

I sometimes laugh at myself for having such thoughts; but they help me see more clearly what our problem might really be: that the individual is so glorified and worshipped in this society and in this institution that we find it almost impossible to ask what obligations the individual student has to the university, as a member of the university community. “Individual obligation” is not very comfortable language for most Americans; we prefer to talk of “roles”. This leads us to talk divergently about the “student” who goes to classes, studios, or laboratories, and the “person”, the young adult, who must have a good time to forget the oppression of the academic grind. (Interestingly enough we often hear students talk similarly about the “professor” and the “real person” who they saw shopping or skiing.)

What we need is to see education as involving whole people—as an integrating experience that includes both academic and the host of other experiences that students and faculty have in and outside of classrooms. Just as there is a need in medicine to deal with the “whole” person, not just the “patient”, higher education must begin to deal with students as whole people, all of their experiences in the world in which they happen to find themselves.

Second, with regard to “truth” in education:

The university is indeed about “truth”, but that “truth” does not lie within whatever “expertise” we faculty may have about any particular subject matter. Instead the truth lives in the integrity of our personal engagement with others, in our interaction with others, especially our students. Our vision of universities needs to leave behind the image of the Professor as an Olympian God pouring wisdom into the heads of empty student vessels, and move toward that of faculty as searchers for truth and wholeness who invite students to share the joy of learning, the joy of discovery. While large classes may require lectures, we can be looking for new ways of teaching in our smaller classes. The object of education is not good teaching, but good learning. The true purpose of a university education is not to provide answers, but to assist students in learning how to ask the larger and larger questions that lead to life long learning. To do this the teacher must be extremely

knowledgeable about his or her subject matter, but also engaged in the search for the larger questions with his or her students.

In my comments on Professor Wilshire's critique about the moral collapse of the university, I suggested that professors must view themselves as being in covenant with their students rather than in contractual relationships. When I finally became a teacher emotionally—some years after my appointment as an assistant professor—I began to see myself as “called” to this profession, to this particular form of human service. The call “to profess” in the original meaning of the term is really a call to community. As the scripture lesson from Ephesians suggests, we must be ever in search of unity in the spirit—a unity that binds our disparate divine gifts and human backgrounds together.

The covenant image that I like best in the Bible is that of the new creation after Noah had survived the flood. In covenanting with Noah not to destroy creation again, God was asking men and women to make a covenant with all of life—with our own lives—sinful and imperfect as they are. In doing this, —in committing ourselves to a life of covenant—we come to share in the transcendent spirit which is God's grace.

But surely there is nothing “transcendent” in the experience of teaching, you may be saying. Let me share what I think is the modern academician's view of creation. In a paraphrase of the first creation story in Genesis, the modern academician believes: first, there were assistant professors; then there were associate professors; then there were full professors, and then there were endowed chaired professors; and then and only then was there *light*. This view of oneself as the repository of “truth” is in direct opposition to the idea of teaching as a covenant not only with all of our students over time, but in fact a covenant with each of our own lives. A covenant transforms the way in which we view ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves.

A covenantal mode of professional ethics for higher education would benefit not only students but professors as well, because covenant assumes mutuality and community. A few weeks ago, I had previously agreed to “teach” a class in a undergraduate honors biology seminar. The topic involved reproductive technology, a special research and teaching interest of mine. The seminar of about 20 - 30 students had been divided into groups of four. My job was to help a group of four students prepare a class on gestational surrogacy and then attend the class as a “resource person”. This turned out to be one of those delightful experiences in teaching that we do not often celebrate because they are so invisible, so spiritual.

What happened to the students after our first planning meeting is a good example of what happens inside a true teacher: excitement about the ideas, about the methods of teaching which assist learning. Class began with the outline of the problems of gestational surrogacy and genetic parenting. With excited voices, the student-teachers asked their classmates: “between the gestational and genetic mother, who is the baby's mother?” These young scientists initially were overwhelmingly in favor of the genetic mother. As the students led the class through a series of questions, I got to see one of those miracle moments in teaching: the moment when finally at the end of the first hour a proponent of the genetic mother had a conceptual breakthrough and finally saw for himself the logic in the opposing position.

With only minor help from me during a brief donut and cider break, the student leaders focused the discussion on the student with the conceptual insight. By the end of the second hour the class had raised a host of questions about technology, our conceptions of what it means to be human, and professional ethics. In concluding the class, the student teachers took a new vote of the class—it was now evenly divided between gestational and genetic proponents. The student with the conceptual breakthrough still believed by his own moral standards that the genetic mother should be the legal mother, but I smiled inside to see how he had led some of his fellow students towards new insights and truths about themselves simply by sharing his own process of bringing critical skills to reexamination of his own stand.

I left that class with a sense of inner glow and wholeness. I had been witness to one of the great privileges of teaching, minds *and* hearts grappling with the big questions. I felt especially good because I had helped to light the inner fire of the student leaders and they had in turn started to light that fire within their fellow students. They had presented a model of enthusiasm for their topic, good preparation and discipline, honesty about their lack of knowledge, and by so doing invited us all to join in a great quest for the truth that lies beyond our own insight and our perspectives on the world and ourselves.

As I sat on the sidelines of the seminar, watching intently and smiling with my eyes as the students turned to me for reassuring eye contact, I felt as if I was watching a wonderful dance, with movements that engender both thoughts and feelings. It had the wonderful sense of wholeness, of all of my senses being engaged. This is what “truth” in education can be.

The lesson I derived from this experience was one I have to relearn every day, week, and year. I am in covenant with life. What I was doing that day was what I call my life’s “work”, not a job, not part of the career ladder. I often say to my new found colleagues that work is what we do after we have won the New York State Lottery. Work gives shape and meaning to our lives. It is something worthwhile and noble beyond ourselves; it is in fact a call to be our true selves. Work is something that is consistent with our visions of ourselves as persons connected to friends, spouses, children, and even parents.

Of course, there is conflict between what we believe to be “work” and the other parts of our lives, but if education is our work, we must be willing to test our own vision of what we are called to do against what we believed we are “required” to do.

Several weeks ago, with a major report due the following Monday, I had my Sunday afternoon clearly mapped out after church: I would work on the report because I had to speak to a student group that evening. And then, one of my sons appeared at my office door and said, “Dad, I am ready for you to help me on my report”. I panicked as we are often to do when, after working 12 and 14 hour days Monday through Friday we are presented with a conflicting obligation. But as I looked into those beautiful dark eyes, a certain calmness came over me because I recognized a truth about myself: I was called to be the father of this child at that particular moment. I put aside my report and began what I knew would be an hour to hour and half process of watching him try to type, asking him questions, showing him previous drafts as he constructed the story of an imaginary country. A country which has no racial conflict despite people of different races, but which

had had a war with its neighboring country. The conflict with the neighboring country had to do with oil. The main holidays in this country had to do with the past war with its neighbor and with protection of wildlife. As I listened and coached, I realized that my son and I were connected and shared many of the same fears—distant wars in oil rich land—and the same hopes—Noah’s hope for human life that is at one with all of the creatures on God’s earth.

When I finally finished my own report just before dinner, and my colleague asked how my Sunday had gone, I said that I had been living with the challenges of an integrated life between my responsibilities at the university and my responsibilities as a father. Both are possible for me only if I believe ultimately that both are parts, even though often conflicting parts, of my quest for wholeness and truth. Both are parts of my own covenant with this life that God has so graciously given me.

III. Building Communities

The important challenge that we face is to continue our life journey, continually asking the question of what is the call for our lives. We have a variety of calls—to be doctors, parents, teachers, business leaders, military leaders, and political leaders. To answer that call, we need to remember the admonition of the Gospel of Matthew: there will be conflict—with our parents, and others who we think are like us. But the larger mission is that the Gospel calls for each of us to be transformed in a radical way—to lose our lives in order to find our lives. The paradox is that by giving of ourselves, loving ourselves, we actually gain a larger, more integrated self because of our community with others. In my view, this means that those of us who call ourselves Christian must be trying to build community in all aspects of our lives, not just the church community.

As we look at some of the big problems of our time—how to build good institutions to care for the infirm, how to build institutions of peace after war, how to build good families in the face of cataclysmic social, economic and technological changes—we should never forget the role that a holistic view of education can play. We should never lose faith in the power of the experience of “good institutions”, particularly good institutions of higher education. We at Cornell need to realize and accept the fact that we are truly one of the world’s great institutions of higher education: and we should focus our energies on ensuring that this is a “good” or better institution by our participation in this community.

You ought to give yourself a chance to feel a little awe struck, or if joy moves you to tears, a little moved to tears as you experience your life. Have you ever been almost in tears after hearing an idea, a piece of music, or a beautiful sunset? I have—take time to savor that moment and reflect what a privilege this life is we have.

From the joy and privilege of individual experience, as with a sunset, to the opportunity and obligation of extending that joy, we honor that privilege, by bringing it back, investing it back, into the larger life of the community. This is in part, I think, is what I mean as taking individual responsibility for making Cornell—and all the basic institutions—a good institution—good because it embodies the best that we as humans can be when we bring our separate gifts together under grace.

We are embedded in institutions and we can choose to help them to move towards goodness, or let ourselves complain about the deficiencies that the anonymous "they" are creating for us. Building good institutions is a long term commitment that keeps faith with a vision of goodness that is not grounded in ourselves, but in the goodness that is the God that is within us when we join in community. For me, it means a life of service, a life of service to this institution, and to its students. This is the challenge of my life, but it is also the great privilege and gift of my life.

Amen