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The University and the ``Broken Heart" Experience

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The University and the ``Broken Heart" Experience

Cover Page Footnote

This informal talk to the faculty and student delegation from Sacred Heart University was held on the University of Central America campus in San Salvador on July 5, 1993.

DEAN BRACKLEY, S.J.

*The University and
the ``Broken Heart" Experience **

The University of Central America (UCA) was started, and like so much else in El Salvador, went through a process of *conscientization*, a clarification of its own mission. And that mission crystallized under the rectorship of Ignacio Ellacuria, one of the Jesuits killed in 1989, who became rector in 1979.

Ellacuria said basically this: the university exists to serve the nation, and to serve the common good. That's what every university should do. And it must do so as a university, not as a political organization, not as a party, much less as a military organization, but as a university. And that means to serve the truth, to project the truth, not simply to its students, but especially to the overall society. In fact, we can define the mission of the university as the ``liberation of the poor" from their multiple chains.

Ellacuria added two theses. First, that the subject matter of the university, of its research, of its teaching, must be above all *la realidad nacional*, must be ``reality." We have to study reality. And secondly, the UCA has three means with which it will pursue its objective: teaching, research, and *proyección social* (social outreach) — the projection of the university into the overall society. Now here's the catch: Ellacuria said that at least under the present circumstances, the *proyección social* has to predominate. *Proyección social* has to inform and guide teaching and research. If you have read any of the papers, if you've seen the news, if you are aware of what the climate of truth and lies are in this country, you can appreciate that the university must not simply push back the frontiers of ignorance or knowledge in a kind of liberal fashion. It must systematically dismantle the structure of lies in the country.

In other words, the university must go beyond simply teaching

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mathematics, simply teaching philosophy, simply teaching "the literature" in the classroom. It must study the literature in order to illuminate *la realidad nacional*, to use the literature as a tool to understand and transform *la realidad nacional*. To take a concrete example, I'm teaching social ethics to theology students here, and I get evaluated at the end of the year by the students. And one of the criteria is: what does this course have to do with *la realidad nacional*? That in itself should raise a lot of questions in your mind, as it does in mine. What about academic freedom? Are we talking about some type of official ideology on the part of the UCA? What about the objective search for truth? What about obscure insects and obscure authors? Can we research them? And what might this mean for a university in the United States?

First, you can't make simplistic adaptations of the model – even though I really do think that the model represents an historic achievement and an historic contribution to the idea of a university. But concretely what would it mean? I think it would mean at Sacred Heart University, for example, or DePaul University, that priority would be given to studying *la realidad mundial*, the world reality. For example, I remember when I studied at the University of Chicago reflecting on the people in the library and my professors who had mastered Western Civilization. They all seemed to be studying "the literature" of the various disciplines, but few seemed to be studying the *world*.

Let's use a very concrete example. Just imagine what happens to you on a trip like this. Unless you are some kind of stone, these people, this reality has the capacity, I think, to blow your world apart – to blow it away. And it seems to me a similar experience is essential to higher education. Absolutely essential. Otherwise, I continue to think, to read, to reflect within the same narrow horizon. And that seems to me to be a really serious problem.

This tribe to which we belong – the middle class – is a very unusual tribe in world history. Middle-class culture has been around roughly for two hundred years. But this culture – the above-survival culture that is not completely taken up with the struggle against death every day – is a brand new culture, and it obviously has made for extraordinary advances. I mean, I do not want to go back to an uncritical awareness, something all too common in traditional

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societies like El Salvador. And I see a lot of that here in El Salvador. But people in the middle-class culture live with a kind of permanent, low-grade distraction about what is really important in life.

I don't want to go back to the cave, but I have to recognize that I live with this dangerous, low-level confusion about what is really important in life – which is the struggle for life itself. Therefore, when these *compesinos* look me straight in the eye, I find somehow these folks are bringing me back home again. They are also blowing my world away. Somehow I feel touched, I feel consolation – and that's a good sign. In the end, it seems to me that we need these people more than they need us, for our education in the broad sense.

So it seems to me that unless the modern university can midwife that fundamental educational experience, it's not fulfilling its responsibility. I say that because, even when we begin the study of *la realidad nacional* in statistics, the risk is that our data will fall like seeds on rocky soil. I think this kind of ``broken heart" experience provides the soil on which the data can bear fruit in our educational teaching. So it is extremely important in the course of our university studies that we encounter the poor. It requires, I'm convinced, an experience like El Salvador. Maybe an experience in Bridgeport. In fact, you don't have to come here. You just have to have your heart broken. It seems to me that the study of *la realidad nacional*, on top of that base of the heartbreaking experience, is fundamental for a valid university degree. If you haven't had that experience, don't get the degree. You are doing your thinking within the context of ``original distortion," a kind of theoretical expression of original sin. Maybe you can do math, maybe you can do some physics, but you don't have a university education.

I want to take the liberal educator on his or her own grounds, and I want to say that learning, that academic rigor, requires this. Don't talk to me about liberal education because you know Shakespeare, if you don't know how many Blacks are in the country, or how many people are poor, or why people are homeless. And don't tell me about academic rigor if you haven't addressed the question of the original distortion and the basic confusion of liberal middle-class culture which allows me to do all my thinking within a limited and unquestioned horizon with people like myself, and on my own terms.

At Fordham I offered to teach an action-reflection course. The

registrar messed up, and the course appeared as a normal course for freshmen. So I get the frosh in there, and I say: Listen, the first thing I have to tell you is that we have a blind date here, and you don't realize what you are getting into. And a number of people dropped out. But fundamentally, it did not distort the sample because there were a number of people in that course who would not have voluntarily opted in. I had worked for the previous six or so years in the South Bronx, as a community organizer. I knew the reality of those people in the South Bronx, and I knew that their reality was very different from their reputation.

I don't want to exaggerate, but the evaluations for the course were very high, and universally so. There was practically no one who did not like the course. It was very simple. They fell in love with some homeless kids. And they said, "You know, I can't believe this." And they'd get blown away. Or they had a negative experience, but they began to pull on the string of that. For four hours a week they had to do that, and they had to give me a one or two page reflection sheet which asked basically, "Where did you feel what St. Ignatius called 'consolation'?" and "Where did you feel this week what St. Ignatius called 'desolation'?" I didn't put it in those terms, but I mention that in case you are familiar with that language. Where did you feel at peace? Your heart warmed? Where did you feel together? Touched? Moved? Serene? Joy? And where did you feel saddened, angry, confused, disoriented, desolation? Because that's where the action is. That's where the world is starting to come apart.

What do you do as a teacher, as a university? When you send people into the community, one of the things that I think is very important is that they run into possible role models for the future: people who are not simply attentive to the problems, but are trying in their own humble way to forge solutions. And that's one of the criteria I was always looking at in a placement. With whom can we put this student? Is there a role model in this place for that person?

The big problem is that the university wants to give answers, but the students don't have the questions. And students, in fact, are scared. What are they there for? They are there basically because it was the next thing on the schedule. They don't want to be poor. And if they go to the university, they won't be poor. And their friends are there.

It seems to me the fundamental thing you do in freshman year is

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to ask some serious questions. People are going through multiple identity crises in the university, and we want to get more healthy background or content into those identity crises. So how do we get people asking serious questions? Do a little work in a shelter for homeless people and reflect on it, systematically, academically. This doesn't mean that people are going to abandon the physics major. But it could raise questions that could make the study of physics a lot more interesting. The fundamental thing that the university should give is questions, not answers. But what do the professors do? We give answers. There's a lot of supply and no demand.

I also recommend the experiment that was very successful at Le Moyne College during the '60s, which was the International House. Dan Berrigan lived there. It ruined some people for life, if you know what I mean. After all, that's one of our objectives in higher education — don't you think? You're ruined for life.

We don't want to just become doomsayers, thinking we are all screwed up and why don't we feel more guilty. But what is lacking in the States? Hope. I know people who have a lot of faith, I know people who are loving, who have a lot of love. But there's not much hope in the United States. And people realize, I think more and more, that the sacraments of hope — the Great American Dream, personal success — are not working. We are falling apart culturally; we are in deep crisis in the States, and I think that is not an exaggeration.

When we talk about this broken-heart experience, we are not talking about a negative experience. We are talking about, if you will, cross and resurrection. We are talking about a necessary condition for having hope at all. And that's what I mean when I say that I think we need the Salvadoran experience and these people more than they need us. What we want to avoid are superficial commitments to a liberal agenda. Only if my heart's been broken, does the thing last, and do I have an anchor for my reflections.

So you come here to El Salvador, and you're apprehensive. You anticipate, perhaps, that you will have an Irish Catholic guilt attack as soon as you go into these *barrios*. But you find that these people accept you. They don't say, "You fascist! You imperialist!" They accept you in all simplicity. They tell you these unbelievable horror stories. You cry. They break your heart. You feel your world crumbling around you. But you're glad you came.

What these people are doing is they are exporting their hope. El Salvador now exports more hope than coffee. And that's why we are here. And what are we finding? We find that we keep asking ourselves, "Why are these people smiling?" But now we begin to understand, and we begin somehow to share their hope. I think, ultimately, their hope stems from their faith. They know that somehow the power of love is going to win out here. And their hope finds expression in a *common project*.

In the United States, the great suspicion, I think, is that things are much worse than we are prepared to accept. I think most people have that on the horizon, and they try to fend it off all the time. What we are saying is, no. Let's let it crash in. Let's let it blow us away. And once that happens, we also have the chance — but only then — to recognize that things are much more wonderful and beautiful than we ever dared to imagine. Because we begin to discover that there's a revolution going on here from the ground up with these people. And that the power of love is real. We have people here willing to give their lives four or five times over for the sake of community, which is something we don't find that often in the States.

So the big question for me is: How can I help you folks to educate yourselves. I'm really interested in having you become "lifers." That this trip, that these studies of justice and peace, that this study of theology, is not just an adornment for your vita. I think the university has as its agenda, ruining your lives. And having this experience of the poor sets your agenda. All I mean to say is that we would hope that you would be Christian revolutionaries for the rest of your lives. And that doesn't come unless your heart has been broken. That doesn't come from reading statistics about homeless people in the United States. At the university, raising questions has priority over providing answers.

What we are all becoming aware of, here as well as in the States, is that the necessary revolution — using the language of Paul VI, the "radical transformation" — has to take place from the ground up. From Bridgeport up, from the South Bronx up, from the suburbs up. And it's got to be grassroots work.