

Educating the Whole Person

What Happens When a Philosopher Reads the Mail

When my youngest daughter neared her high school graduation, she was the recipient of stacks of mail from colleges and universities all across the country, public and private, well-known and previously unheard of. It has been fun for me to look through these letters, books, and even the DVDs sent by some. It is fascinating to see how colleges and universities make their pitch to prospective students in words and pictures. These mailings show a good deal about how these institutions view their student pool. The materials also tell the viewer a bit about the college/university that sent it, though not as much as one might suppose. If the name of the institution were blanked out on these fliers, how many of them could be identified by the pictures and descriptions that are included? One can make some pretty good guesses based on geographical hints—the one with the palm trees and stretches of white beach is more likely to be Eckerd College than it is to be St. Olaf—but the rest of the stuff is amazingly generic. Maybe generic sells?

One of the frequent parts of this generic pitch has been for colleges (less so for large public universities) to make the claim that they educate the whole person. “We educate body, mind, and spirit,” some say, “enabling growth in heart and mind.” “Where the intellectual you, the social you, and the private you become one,” one institution put it. Some refer to this education as holistic; some refer to the education of the whole person. The language is not always the same, and the accompanying photos often make one wonder how the language connects to the reality, but the frequency of similar references made me a bit curious.

Why is this such a common part of the self-description of American colleges? Do we assume that college is a place where one will become a whole person? Does anyone take this language seriously? Does it

shape curriculum? Does it shape pedagogy? Does it influence which faculty the institution tries to hire or the ones it promotes? Is anyone on these campuses responsible for articulating what “the whole person” means?

One evening, I spent a couple hours exploring the websites of many of the colleges represented in my daughter’s stack. What I wanted to find was *any* indication that these questions were answered or even pursued. It would have been so nice to find that if I clicked on the words “holistic” or “whole personhood” or “growth in heart and mind,” I would have found a page where all this was explained or engaged. What I found instead was a kind of silent assumption, namely that everyone knew what this meant and, therefore, no one needed to explain it. I pointed this out to my daughter, and she responded, “Oh, Dad, you take things so seriously. That’s the trouble with being a philosopher: you suppose that people even *want* to mean what they say.”

Maybe she is right. It would not be the first time. Ever since Socrates walked the streets of Athens, philosophers have been asking people to explain what they mean on the assumption that they really meant it. Socrates asked, since citizens had charged him with impiety, that someone should give a coherent account of what piety and impiety were. They did not, yet they convicted and executed him. So, I guess I stand in that tradition. Yet I put a good deal less at risk than Socrates did. All I am asking of these educational institutions is that someone should give an account of what whole-personhood is and what education for it should really look like. Is that too much to ask?

Maybe so. The university where I teach has completed a long process of writing a strategic plan. Guess what? The language of educating the whole person shows up there. I fired off a couple of e-mails saying, “Let’s not talk this way unless we’re willing to explain what this really means.” But it is almost as though the language is chosen because it sounds good yet says nothing. That sounds like the definition for euphemism, doesn’t it?

Sometimes “whole person” talk is a way of justifying required courses in physical education, health, religion, or something else. Those are not bad things to include in the curriculum. Better yet might be to include studies and practices that unite body, mind, and spirit, like dancing, yoga, playing a sport, or participating in the Japanese tea ceremony or the Christenson wine ceremony. But there is so much

more that such rhetoric could mean and could imply. Or—my great fear—it can mean nothing. I write this in the hope that, for my own university community at least, it should mean something substantial.

Wholeness and Its Lack

In order to notice the lack of wholeness, one must have a notion of what the whole is. I can say to someone, “But you don’t know the whole story” only if I know the story is larger than they know. I recognize a semi-circle because I have a pretty good image of what the circle, of which this is the part, looks like.

But it is equally true that we cannot describe wholeness if we do not know some common ways in which something can fail to be whole. A pie is not whole if it has slices missing, but it is also not whole if it is missing a filling or a crust or if it is “half baked.” Some things lack wholeness in one or two ways. But some things, humans especially, can lack wholeness in many dimensions. There are some trivial senses in which a person could be less than whole—e.g. being an amputee or lacking a fairly essential human capacity such as the ability to speak. There are even some capacities which, if missing, make us doubt whether the being is human at all. Consequently we talk about an unfortunate individual “in a sustained vegetative state.”

What are the kinds of lack of wholeness? Let’s try an inventory:

1. *Fractionality* — A thing can be less than whole by missing some of its essential parts.
2. A thing can be less than whole by lacking an essential dimension; this we might call being *narrowed* or *flattened*, or being *shallow* or *superficial*.
3. A thing can be less than whole by being *undeveloped*, *retarded*, or *arrested*.
4. A thing can be less than whole by being *broken*, *fractured*, *fragmented*, or *disintegrated*.
5. A thing can be less than whole by being *handicapped* or *disabled*.
6. A thing may be less than whole by becoming *disconnected*, *separated*, or *alienated* from what sustains it.
7. A thing may be less than whole by *losing its life*, becoming *de-vitalized* or *de-activated*.

8. A person can be less than whole by failing at the task of achieving her/his calling. This is what Aristotle calls *a-psychia*. Erazim Kohak, a contemporary philosopher, writes, “Being human is not just a matter of being a member of a species . . . it is a task to which we are called. . . . Humans can be in-human, dogs cannot be in-dog.”

There may be more than these eight ways of losing wholeness. Some of the above apply to objects, some only to living and growing things, and some to things that are active. But all of these senses, I would submit, apply to being human. Humans can fail to be whole in at least these many ways. Whether the list is complete or not, it shows us what a complex and multi-dimensional thing human wholeness is.

Academe Undermines Wholeness—Some Testimonials

All education does not lead to wholeness. In fact, some education leads in the opposite direction. Sharon Dalos Parks writes, “. . . professors [and many other highly educated professionals] have been and are particularly vulnerable to functioning as less than whole persons.”

My colleague, Dr. Andrea Karkowski, responding to my question about why more faculty had not turned out to hear the poet laureate of the United States on our campus said, “You should remember, Tom, that many of us are trained in disciplines that require a diminished humanity.”

Parker Palmer writes:

My depression was partly the result of my own schooling, partly due to the way I was formed—and deformed—in educational systems of this country, to live out of the top inch and a half of the human self.

We are a culture that values mastery and control. But in the shadow of these values lies a profound sense of isolation from our human wholeness. . . . It is only human to trade our wholeness for societal approval. . . . Education at its best . . . is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about increasing and renewing the vitality of life.

And Steven Glazer writes, “Education can serve as the core of a lifelong journey toward wholeness, but more often it is merely a random accumulation of facts, figures, and skills.”

Some years ago, a colleague of mine serving with me on a committee excused himself from the conversation which had come round to the discussion of a difficult ethical issue. He said, "I have nothing to say here because ethics is not my specialty." I responded, "We don't talk about ethics because it's our specialty, we talk about ethics because we are human."

Many of us feel uncomfortable when we are called upon to socialize with students, for example, as part of the welcome to new students during their orientation days. We feel vulnerable when we encounter them person to person, unprotected by the shelter of the podium, our notebook full of lecture notes, and our expertise. Naked and un-armed, we are required to meet another person.

Academe Undermines Wholeness—A Catalogue

1. We break reality into disciplinary categories and sub-categories and frequently offer them to the learner as if they had nothing to do with each other. Mark C. Taylor, in a provocative *New York Times* essay, "End the University As We Know It," suggests that disciplinary studies be supplanted (or at least supplemented) with what he calls "problem focused clusters." He suggests, for example, an academic focus called "Water," which would bring geologists, biologists, physicists, economists, political scientists, philosophers, historians, and students of religion to the table.

2. Academe leads students to believe, like most of their professors, that becoming a specialist expert is the end of education. The academic ideal at many institutions is to learn more and more about less and less. The titles of dissertations attest to this. Is the increased bacterial count in underwear worn for several days or the use of footnotes in the works of medieval philosopher Duns Scotus really the culmination of an education? I remember the despair of a former student of mine who lamented the grind of her dissertation work. She said, "I'm writing about such a tiny topic in which I have little real interest. It was the big questions, the existential questions, that first attracted me to the study of religion. But it's like no one is allowed to ask them anymore at this level. We're all pressed to become sub-specialists."

3. Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive development catalogues six different levels of thinking and learning. But there are several studies that show that about eighty-five percent of academic learning even at the

college level focuses only on the first level, the learning and repeating of information. If that is true, it serves to reinforce a flattened curriculum. The curriculum may contain a whole lot of information about a whole lot of things, but if all of the learning is informational, the education produced may be a mile wide but an inch deep. A whole education would include understanding, application, analysis, engagement, criticism, and creative synthesis. A flattened curriculum also produces a flattened thinker to deal with it. A person may be extremely well-informed, particularly in this electronic age, but if the person does not know how to understand, analyze, evaluate, apply, and synthesize this information, it cannot really become knowledge.

4. By focusing learning in courses, in classrooms, in departments, and in schools, we reinforce the idea that these things have little connection to "the real world" or to the student's development.

Education has become the consumption of academic units connected in no essential way to those who consume them. Yet we claim, in our literature, to be "transforming lives through education." For how many of our students does this occur? How many connect their learning to their lives, to the problems of the world or to the communities in which they live and work? Learning, because it is institutionalized in the way it is, also frequently gets separated from the world it ought to serve.

Models of the Human

The outcome of every process of education is some kind of human being. But what kind of human? Is it, as president George H.W. Bush said, "persons to compete effectively in global markets"? Is that the human we want? Or is such education, as Thomas Merton put it, "the mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate charade?"

The Technocrat

David Orr, in his provocative book, *Earth in Mind: On Education, the Environment and the Human Prospect*, contrasts the educational system that produced Albert Speer, chief architect and armaments engineer of the Third Reich, with the education system that produced Aldo Leopold, American conservation biologist and one of the earliest voices of the environmental movement.

Speer's education was the very best scientific education the world had to offer. He graduated with degrees from universities in Karlsruhe, Munich, and Berlin. The result of this education, Orr points out, was a generation without defenses for the seductions of Hitler and the new technologies of the Nazi regime. Toward the end of his life Speer wrote these plaintive words: "The tears that I shed are for myself as well as for my victims, for the man I could have been but was not, for a conscience I so easily destroyed."

Leopold's education, by contrast, produced a man capable of challenging the basic assumptions of both his culture and the education he had received. He had been trained as a wildlife manager but soon came to see the animals he tended as spiritual companions, the natural areas he surveyed as his teacher, and himself as a steward of an incredible gift. Both Speer and Leopold received a scientific education, but there was something about Speer's education that made the death of conscience and the death of a questioning awareness possible. At the same time there was something about Leopold's education (whether at university or from his family or from his long walks in nature) that kept his questioning and wondering self alive.

The Consumer

Every educational effort has, somewhere embedded deep within it, an anthropology, i.e. an image of the human toward which education moves. Any culture may have more than one such image, but it is important to recognize what the dominant image is. So, what is the image of the human that pervades American culture and education? If it were to be articulated, here is what I think it would say:

We, humans, are real in proportion to what we have. Those who have nothing truly run the risk of being nobody. We are free in proportion to our ability to obtain our wants. Our identity is basically that of a consumer. We work in order to earn money. We earn money in order to buy stuff. We have stuff in order to manifest our freedom and our identity. We need things that will tell us and others who we are. As the things we have grow old or out of fashion they become invisible. ("I don't have a thing to wear.") New clothes and gear are like social life preservers. Without them we will sink into a sea of nothingness. Besides the need for identity-giving things, we also have a need for entertainment, something to occupy our minds lest we have to notice reality. Education should provide us with the means to get good jobs,

i.e. jobs that will allow us to live lives of well-entertained consumers. The having of these things is what it means to be a success.

This consumerist model of the human has at least three problems associated with it.

1. It gives us a shallow and one-dimensional picture of what it means to be human. A person who literally is what he/she has is a mannequin. A mannequin is built to display clothes and other accessories. It truly is what it has. But the last time I checked there are no mannequins worth getting to know. Apart from the stuff he/she displays, there is no one there—no mind, no soul, no personality, no one who can plan a life, have a genuine concern, show care, or take an idea seriously. They may be hot, cool, and/or sophisticated, but are they human? No.

2. The consumerist model of the human makes all human relationships competitive, or it makes us begin to use each other as accessories in the social identity Olympics. Cool, handsome, or beautiful friends are a kind of human jewelry. Shown off in the right place they help us get noticed. They help us attain and maintain reality.

3. The consumerist lifestyle consumes the earth and its resources. Contemporary Americans are the most environmentally destructive and wasteful humans who have ever lived. Is that the human we have aligned our educational institutions to produce? We often divide the globe between the developed, the developing, and the undeveloped. The assumption is that everyone wants to and should move toward the lifestyle that we, the developed world, model. India and China, the two most populous nations on earth, are quickly advancing into the developed category. That should make us all feel good, right? The answer that resource scientists all over the world are giving us is a clear, "No." The planet cannot survive huge numbers of people living high consumption lifestyles. So let's convince all of *them* to stop. The planet can afford only a few high consumption lifestyles and they, clearly, should belong to us. Right? I do not think so.

The Seeker of Oblivion

So, Albert Speer, the soulless technocrat, is not the model of the human we want. Neither is the successful consumerist, nor even the "wannabe" consumerist many of us, if we are honest, yearn to be. There are a few other models that seem to be common, particularly among the young. The person who uses drugs, alcohol, or extreme forms of

entertainment as a way to find diversion and oblivion is surely one of them. There are lots of kids in college who seem to be pursuing that path. I can understand it only as a kind of anaesthesia, an attempt to dull the pain or anxiety of life.

The Dutiful Drudge

Another common pattern is the life of the person who works and works without stopping to wonder why. A frequent example of this is the parent who basically “lives for their kids” so that those children can become parents who indulge their kids, *ad infinitum*. This seems to work until someone asks, “Is this all there is?” I attended a funeral of a man about whom the only thing anyone said as a eulogy was, “He was a good provider.”

Remember the lyrics to the song, “Whistle While You Work,” sung by the dwarfs in Disney’s movie *Snow White*?

We dig dig dig dig dig dig dig from early morn to night.
We dig dig dig dig dig dig dig up everything in sight.
We dig up diamonds by the score,
A thousand rubies, sometimes more.
We don’t know what we dig them for.
We dig dig digga dig dig. . . .

Hard work and sacrifice for the kids—it almost sounds like an admirable ethic. We do not like to hear it questioned. But of course its just consumerism with a less offensive face. If these are not the models of the human that inspires students’ and teachers’ efforts at education, then what should be? Do we have something better to offer?

David Orr, in *Earth in Mind*, has written:

The plain fact is that the world does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, story tellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture defines it.

Biblical Images of the Human

The opening chapters of Genesis tell a story about how we, humans, are related to the created world and to the creator. If we read this story with some care we can discover many things about ourselves:

1. We discover that we are creatures, a part of (not apart from) the creation, a creation that God declares to be good. The creation does not belong to us. It is not ours to do with as we please. It is our home, our source, but not our possession. Even what we are called, “humans” (*adamah* in Hebrew), means “from the earth.”

2. We discover that we are called into conversation with the Creator. The whole of the Bible may be read as that ongoing conversation. One only has to read the Psalms to see the variety of forms that conversation takes—praise, hard questions, complaints, puzzlement, lamentation, and expressions of awe and wonder. Because of our ability with language we are response-able. And we are *responsible* because we are *response-able*.

3. The Genesis story shows us that we are answerable, and it also shows us that we have a calling, in particular the calling to stewardship. We are called to be caretakers of the creator’s world—a world God loves, a world in which God’s glory is manifest.

4. The Genesis story also reveals that we humans are not satisfied with our creature/steward situation. We want to be the master, not the servant; we want to be the owner, not the steward; and we do not want to be accountable. We would rather deny and hide. We do not like having to live well within limits, practicing *shalom*. We want to set the agenda and master everything for our own wants.

5. The Genesis story makes clear to us that we are at the most fundamental level children of the same parents. We are, beneath our differences, brothers and sisters. This implies that difference is a surface phenomenon, not a deep one. All attempts to see the world in “us/them” ways tell only a fractional truth. We should be suspicious of all rhetoric that begins with this chauvinistic assumption.

A second biblical story, and the primary informing story for the Christian, is the story of God’s love for the world manifest in Jesus. God comes into the world and embraces the world in love, being human to show us what being human is all about. The shocking thing about the story is that this embrace of the world finally takes the form of the cross. But the crucifixion, rather than being a tragic end, makes it possible for humans to realize a new life in Christ. We are transformed, new creatures, for Christ now lives in us as we embrace the world in love.

What follows from seeing Christ as the model of humanity?

1. It implies that things that are held to be of such great importance to the culture (wealth, status, political and military might, gender, ethnicity, being a religious insider/outsider) are worth very little.

2. It implies that we reach out to the outsider in need, that we are intentional boundary-crossers.

3. It implies that we practice a community that refracts God's love into the world in which we live.

The Christian image of the human is Christ. The Christian understanding of human relationship is *agape*, unconditional love. The Christian understanding of community is *koinonia*, a coming together that realizes the reign of God. The model of responsible human agency is *vocation*, a way of working that allows us to focus on the real needs of the neighbor. The human mode of being is *gifted freedom*. As Luther so clearly put it:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. . . . Freed from the vain attempt to justify himself . . . [the Christian] should be guided by this thought alone . . . considering nothing but the need of the neighbor.

I believe that the story that informs our understanding of what it means to be human is one of the most important things that we learn in life. It is more important than the particulars that we learn and soon forget. It is more important because it shapes who we will become, how we understand ourselves, and what we will do (and not do) with the rest of the education we receive. When we honor our alumni we should ask more than, "What are their achievements? Are they a success as the culture counts success?" We should ask, "What kind of humans have they become? What message are we conveying to our students by honoring them?"

The Lutheran Contribution

What have Lutherans brought to the discussion of whole personhood? There are a few things. It is not that these things are exclusively Lutheran, but that Lutherans have emphasized them and have good historical and theological reason to emphasize them. Here is a short list:

Luther's understanding of *freedom*, mentioned above. Being freed from securing our own right relationship with God, we are free to attend to the needs of the world and our neighbor at hand. Lacking freedom we are all puppets of the powers that dominate our culture.

Engaged and caring criticism and self-criticism. Luther was certainly critical and self-critical, yet he was not critical the way a cynic is critical, dissociating himself from those things of which he is critical. Luther was most critical of the things he cared most about.

A skepticism about the division of the world into neat dualisms — sacred and secular, body, mind, and soul. Because of the Lutheran understanding of incarnation and sacrament, Lutherans tend to see the sacred *in* the secular, religious calling *in* everyday work, worship *in* everyday tasks, etc.

The deep appreciation and practice of music and other expressive and celebratory arts. Luther said that music was second in importance only to the word of God. It is clearly one of those places where flesh and spirit, thought and emotion come together in a most vivid way. Luther also saw God manifest in the everyday physical world, including his pint of beer and the gathering of friends at his table.

Seeing all work as vocation, an opportunity to share the love of God and one's own gifts by serving the real needs of the neighbor and the deep needs of the world.

Practicing paideutic education, i.e. education that integrates the acquisition of knowledge with the development of the student as a person. Unlike the prevailing model at most universities, professors at Lutheran colleges have been practicing paideutic education for generations.

How This Image of the Human Might Inform Education

I am not so deluded as to suppose that I will say the last word on this topic. I believe that "how do we educate for wholeness?" is one of those open questions that we never finish asking and reconsidering. So, what I do hope is to say something provocative, something that will begin or advance the discussion, not end it.

Toward the end of a faculty retreat that focused on education for whole personhood, I invited the participants to articulate what we hoped to be the product of our efforts at educating. Here is what we came up with. We want to educate a person who:

Is not just . . .	but is . . .
fitted with one skill or one domain of knowledge	broad, deep, and adaptable
a person with a diploma	a genuine learner
well-informed	an inquirer, part of a community of inquirers
a job holder	a person with a passion, a calling, a vocation
a person with an opinion	a critical thinker who gives and respects reasons
critical of others	capable of self-criticism, corrigible
a partisan	a partner in genuine dialogue
a strong mind	an open mind, capable of continued learning
a contact or acquaintance	a friend
a problem seer	a problem solver
an observer	a person actively engaged
an ego	a person connected in community and relationship
a cynic, a disconnected critic	a person who cares
a realist	a person with hope, willing to act on the change they desire for the world

Toward this end, education, informed by the biblical, Christian, and Lutheran understanding of the human, should include:

- The communication of awe, wonder, and thanksgiving in all the things we learn about the world, seeing it as a gift to be savored and shared, not just a bunch of resources to be selfishly used and wasted.

- The study and practice of creation stewardship—learning to live sustainably on this planet and respectfully with our fellow creatures. This is particularly difficult because there are no teachers; none of us are masters of this discipline, only learners.
- Criticism and self-criticism—learning to participate in a community that is free to consider any view and critique all those things in our culture that seem to demand absolute commitment. Such a community should be free, open, respectful, and appreciative of diversity. We should learn to criticize the things we care about, practicing criticism as a form of care.
- Be openly suspicious of all forms of chauvinism: nationalistic, racial, economic, cultural, ideological, *and* religious.
- Study and practice justice, peace-making, community building, victim solidarity.
- Vocational education—i.e. education that leads not just to a job or just down the path of a career, but rather that leads to an understanding of jobs and careers as a calling, a way, in love, that our gifts may intersect with the deep needs of the world.
- A chance to hear the biblical and Christian informing stories and weigh them over against the stories that dominate our culture and rule over so many of our lives.
- Education that connects to the deep questions, anxieties, and hopes that students have.
- Ample opportunities to participate in the arts including music, dance, theater, and the visual arts and the ways all these arts can be brought together in worship and the celebratory life of a college or university. Create liturgies of connection.
- Education that challenges over-simple either/ors and affirms both/ands.
- Education that challenges academic boundaries and fragmented views of reality.
- Education that unites theory and practice, academic learning and community engagement, reflection and life, analyzing serious problems and giving hope.

If we were to make wholeness a genuine academic end, we would have to be aware of the ways that academe undermines wholeness.

But more than just avoiding these things, we also need to work deliberately to counter them. We must:

- Challenge academic separations and the structures that support them.
- Deliberately unite theory and practice, academy, community, and world.
- Connect learning and experience and learning with personal development.
- Educate both for connected breadth and for depth.

As you can see this is not a curriculum, certainly not a list of courses, though it certainly could have curricular implications. Nor is it a pedagogy exactly, though it has implications for that as well. Rather it is the cement that holds the curricular bricks together, that relates the academic to the student services part of any college. It is an agenda for asking questions about what we consider to be the most important things we teach, require, and hope our students will do.

What is the end in light of which we choose educational means? Who is the human whom this education will shape? As a Christian college in the Lutheran tradition, do we take the biblical informing stories seriously? If so, where is that seriousness manifest? If we do not take them seriously, why not? Is it because we really serve the consumerist model of student success and life achievement? Or is it that, in spite of the lip service we may pay to a religious tradition, we do not take its image of the human seriously? If that is so, then religious language has also become a euphemism, a happy talk that means nothing. Or perhaps in spite of our Christian/Lutheran facade we really worship the pantheon of gods the culture advances—wealth, success, prestige, respectability, consumption, entertainment, and oblivion. That's a particularly deep failure for a religion like Christianity whose theology is informed by the challenging humanity of Jesus and the shocking and liberating good news of the presence of God's kingdom in the world.

Do Lutheran colleges and universities do well in the process of educating toward whole personhood? There is solid evidence that Lutheran colleges are quite good in many of these areas and not bad in others. But I am sure there are also some of these we do poorly and some not at all.

So, what should we do? I suggest these six priorities:

- Quit doing things in a particular way simply because that is the way everybody does them.
- Take the claim to be educating the whole person seriously.
- Make clear and explicit what the model of the whole human is toward which we educate.
- Explore the implications of the biblical/Christian/Lutheran model as well as solicit other models people may wish to put forward.
- Find educational means that actually lead to our educational ends.
- Quit being a cause of human fragmentation and narrowness, and start becoming part of the solution.