

Random Reflections of a Resolute Runner

by Sharon M. Howell, C.S.J.

There is never enough time to put my thoughts to paper. I also have to admit that I will often let day-to-day tasks distract me from the ‘work’ of composing my thoughts into some type of order. This time, I was all together too successful in accommodating distractions—was never able to get two decent thoughts to come together in any type of pattern. Three themes kept revolving through my mind, none of which amounted to a full blown topic, just reflections that the Summer Seminar affirmed for me; things that I do not want to forget. It occurred to me that writing them down would allow me to remember and set the reflections and me free to live.

What If?

Three days prior to the week long seminar, as I was doing my preparatory reading from Fr. Hesburgh, I had occasion to muse about the possibility of Academic Freedom for Students. What if our students were free to learn what they wanted to learn from us, not what we wanted to teach them? What if, Academic Freedom in a Catholic University made it a natural means for ‘drawing out the best’ of our students by treating with the reverence that someone has had the before us, for good or for ill, and that they bring with them knowledge life, culture, and previous education—that we would continue to develop means of finding out what really is in this human being that sits before us, and what will it take to be a part of the process of enhancing what is already there, and clearing all blockages so that this one will go on to be the best possible...., and the one seated next, and so on. What would it be like for our students, and for us, to know that the acceptable discourse among us would only be that which lifts up the intellect, even if it may function slightly different from a preferred style. Correction comes in creating another perspective from which to look, preferably rooted in a values complementary to Catholic Christian values. There is always an invitation to think about how to best use the gifts and talents that are seen and unseen, but never overt or subtle maneuvers that can undermine or literally destroy growth and development. We can never be sure that what any of us is doing is undermining the growth and progress of our students; but as a deceased wise man use to say, "Say your prayers, and treat people well," you cannot stray too far. Especially, if the fundamental premise for teaching at all is to draw out and form the best that is possible for our students, young or not-so-young. What if the students had academic freedom?

Sabbatical Year

After the first day of conversation, I had an opportunity to talk with a student affairs colleague who was not feeling quite as free to pursue the job that we, in student affairs are hired to do, due to concern about what could possibly happen if the course of action

taken was not acceptable in this Catholic educational institution. The same day, I ran into two faculty colleagues; one, on her way out to pursue her sabbatical, goals and objectives all lined up: another sweating out what the student evaluation process might do their review. I wondered what it might be like if all of us could apply for a year of rest and academic pursuit, right here on this campus, in our various settings, with the simple goals of doing our jobs to the best of our ability, using our best gifts and talents to further this university and our discipline; counting on free and respectful discourse among our colleagues so that if we are treading into turbulent waters, we know we are not out there by ourselves. The value of a Catholic educational institution is the risk in preparing our students to think, analyze, and live in a world that fundamentally requires that they think and analyze or they cannot live. What if we could dream of curriculum and programs that pushed the limits, and yet were firmly framed in concepts complementary to Catholic Christian values so that we all would learn—and very likely re-evaluate how we live outside of this place, once we go home. A year free *to* pursue, create, work; free *from* fear, sabotage, and working at a level less than we are meant. Imagine what would happen if we all were operating at our fullest potential.

The Human Element

Throughout the week of the seminar, as we discussed all of the technical operations for academic freedom, it seemed to me that there is a tremendous human element that is operational at all times as we embark on the task teaching and learning. Personality plays a significant role. The answer to the existential questions, what did you/I really come here for; and why do you/I stay?, play a very significant role in how we undertake whatever our function is in the university community. Some of the case studies we looked at that demonstrated conflict—especially the ones that took on a life of their own—begged the human question, if only there had been a ‘friend’ or a mediator in the room as the discussion eroded?

Afterthought

Freedom to use the gifts and talents that we all have, albeit different and varied, to the best possible level, for the sake of self, other, and institution. I submit that an urban Catholic university, like St. Thomas, has not only the *right* to expect it, but the *responsibility* to make sure it happens; and as such, foster the type of education that prepares all of us to live in this world as it is, today—and into the millennium. But you know, all we have is today—let us live it to the full!