

Educating for Shalom

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No thoughtful person is completely happy with human life. So much is plainly wrong with it. We all know garden-variety frustrations: the first spot in a green arrow traffic lane is taken by some tweeter who lurches forward only *after* the arrow has come and gone. You buy something that needs to be assembled and the instructions for assembly don't make any sense. The Beethovens of the world lose their hearing and metal heads manage to keep theirs.¹

But far beyond these low-level frustrations lie the serious ones. I have in mind the things anybody can see on any day in Yahoo News: celebrations of sports victories that then turn violent; Middle East strife all over again; terrible suffering from natural disasters, including by people too poor to live anywhere but on a flood plain. We have famine in countries run by horribly corrupt leaders. We have the abuse of women and children, labor and sex slavery, maltreatment of God's good creation, misuse of antibiotics leading to the emergence of super bacteria that are immune. We have terrorists who kidnap groups of young girls from their schools—all because the kidnappers are solid in their conviction that girls have no business getting educated in schools. We have split churches, split marriages, split friendships. We have angry sports, vengeful movies, music with an attitude.

We have the spectacle of a brilliant American philosopher—an atheist named Thomas Nagel, who claims that if he ever began to believe the Nicene Creed he would immediately conclude that he had lost his mind. In 2012 Oxford University Press published Nagel's book titled *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. In his book, Nagel exposes his deep doubts about materialism and blind evolution, about their weakness when it comes to explaining human emotions, human decision-making, human morality, and human consciousness itself. Other atheists went nuts. An atheist who is not a hard materialist? Unthinkable! Ridiculous! Above all, heretical! Steven Pinker lamented “the shoddy reasoning of a once-great thinker.”²

Much is plainly wrong in the world, including in the world of academe, and many could draw up a description of it with, I'm sure, more authority and verve than mine.

Prophets Dream Dreams of Shalom

Of course the story of trouble in the world is a very old one. The great prophets of the Bible knew how many ways human life can go wrong because they also knew how many ways it could go right. And they dreamed of a time when God would put things right again.³ The book of Isaiah, in

particular, dreams of a new age in which crookedness would be straightened out, rough places made plain. The foolish would be wise, and the wise, humble. The prophets dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would run with wine, a time when weeping would be heard no more and people could sleep without a weapon on their lap. They could work in peace without fear that somebody would steal their harvest. A wolf could lie down with a lamb, the wolf cured of all carnivorous appetite. All nature would be fruitful and full of the wonder of God; all humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God. Their shouts of joy would arise everywhere, from women in city streets and from men going down to ships.

Inspired by the prophecies of *shalom*, the church father Irenaeus imagined a time when even the grape vines would be full of joy: “The days will come in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes [...] And when any of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, ‘I am a better cluster; take me; bless the Lord through me.’”⁴

All this is what the prophets call *shalom*. It’s the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in fruitfulness, justice, and delight. We call *shalom* “peace,” but it means so much more than just peace of mind or ceasefire among enemies. In the Bible, “shalom” means *universal flourishing and delight*, each created thing a wonder, each created person a source of joy. Reigning over it all is the earth’s Creator and Savior—the one who opens doors and opens hearts and speaks welcome to children.⁵

Shalom includes healthy external relations among people, creation, and God, but also the healthy internal relations that sponsor the healthy external relations. A person who acts justly toward others also has the internal virtue of righteousness that makes him disposed to do justice. A person who acts generously toward others and groups of others also has the virtue of love that makes her disposed to act generously. A person who treats non-human creation in a healthy, respectful way also has the virtue of obedience to God, who has asked us human beings to be good stewards of creation.

Sad to say, we are now fallen creatures in a fallen world. The Christian gospel tells us that sin and misery spoil so much in this corrupt world but also that, in Christ, all heaven has come to do battle. Christ the victor has come to defeat the powers and the principalities, to move the world over onto a new foundation, and to equip a *people* to lead the way in righting what’s wrong, in reforming what’s corrupted, in creating beauty and encouraging delight in it—in other words, a people to do the things that make for shalom.

Here, I believe, we may find the main role of Christian higher education.⁶ It’s not only the church and para-church justice groups and inner-city housing organizations that are interested in training people to work for reform in the world. With its highly educated and highly trained faculty

and staff, with its curriculum and co-curriculum, with all its goods and services, the Christian university⁷ is also wonderfully positioned to form students into agents of shalom, models of shalom, witnesses to shalom.⁸

Relevant Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes

But what does this mean practically? How does this great vision cash out in the ordinary business of teaching and studying, of homework and sports and friends and plays and music and rehearsing for Baccalaureate?

Of course, a decent answer to this question would require a lot more than one paper could suggest. But let me make some observations.

First, the connection of Christian higher education with the great biblical dream of shalom implies that in Christian universities we will regularly remind ourselves of the vision itself. We will ask ourselves what the point is of all this money and effort and toil. Surely for parents the point isn't just satisfying their children's grandparents that the family hasn't gone worldly on them. Surely that can't be enough. Surely the point isn't just that there are fewer drugs and thugs in Christian universities—though, if true, that would be a significant advantage. Surely the point isn't just outfitting young people with the knowledge and skills they need for the job market, though becoming marketable is—especially these days—certainly necessary. Surely the point isn't simply to help strengthen student faith in Jesus Christ, though that's a matter so important one could never spend enough for it.

These things are all worthy things: it's fine to maintain a family tradition by sending sons and daughters to Notre Dame or Calvin or King's. It's fine to want high quality, dedicated teachers, and a school even marginally less dangerous where substance abuse and sexual abuse and violence are concerned. It's fine if education makes our children economically viable. And it's unspeakably fine if, in the course of their education, they are drawn like a magnet to our Lord through the modelling of a priest, or the intelligent devotion of a coach, or the young, but stout, faith of their peers.

All these are fine things. But none is enough. A bigger goal of Christian higher education, I suggest, is equipping young people with the knowledge, the skills, the practices, and the attitudes that can be thrown into the battle for peace, the battle for universal wholeness, justice, and delight. As C. S. Lewis once said, we are trying to retake territory that has been captured by the enemy. We are trying to anticipate the eventual coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness by setting off small bursts of shalom all over the place.

Students will need knowledge, skills, practices, and attitudes for this recapturing program. So (second observation) we teach them what we know of the world. We teach them the functions and beauty of numbers and sets of numbers; we teach them the wonder of cells and of cell division. We teach them that atheism has its orthodoxies, and that they do not include purpose or progress in an evolving creation.

In history, students learn to see the great movements among humans in God's world, and how these have sometimes been set off by the unexpected acts of lone individuals. More than that, as Paul Gagnon once observed, we study and teach history in order to develop good judgment.⁹ We want students to understand from a biblical point of view what's comic and what's tragic in a fallen world, and how strikingly often they combine. We want students not to be surprised, as Gagnon puts it, when "failure teaches us more than victory does" or when triumph curdles into folly. We want them to distrust simple accounts of complex events and to be prepared for the place human irrationality has in the course of human history. All this equips them to understand the world in which they are to be peace agents. Just as no CIA agent would be sent to an area of which she was ignorant, so it's folly to expect our sons and daughters to serve and help transform a world they have not studied.

We learn in literature classes the best that's been thought and said. By reading fiction and biography, students learn, among other things, something about human character. They learn, for instance, how possible it is for great godliness and great wickedness to cohabit in a single person. They learn to appreciate the surprises and ironies of human character—how various it is, how bizarre, how delightful, how sometimes confounding: How could a man known for simple acts of kindness also be so boring that he can light up a room just by leaving it?

As they read and ponder and discuss, students' knowledge of human character deepens and becomes subtle. It's part of their equipment as peace agents. No business group, no army, no task force, no basketball team is sent out to engage a foe, or serve a client, without knowing their character and habits, without trying to climb inside their skin. And so it is with Christian students reading fiction and biography. It's required training for the Peace Corps.

But (third observation) Christian education isn't only for dispensing knowledge. Students gain skills as well. They learn to read both charitably and critically. They learn to write better—not to show off, but in the first place as a mere courtesy to their readers and then, in the end, so as to spread truth efficiently.

Students may learn a variety of other skills as well:

- to form and follow a research plan;
- to follow the streams of Scripture and Neoplatonism that flow through St. Augustine's theology of the Trinity;
- to understand and speak a second language in obedience to the Scriptural summons to hospitality;
- to argue without quarreling.¹⁰

Because shalom includes not just justice and harmony, but also delight given and received, some student skills will come in from the co-curriculum as well:

- to play a scale in thirds up to tempo;
- to hit a topspin lob;
- to befriend a loner;
- to disappear into a theatrical role;
- to lead singing not in your concert voice but in your “start singing, everybody” voice.

In these and kindred areas students acquire skills. Of course they become equipped for jobs. But, even these competitive days, that’s not the final goal of their Christian higher education. The reason is that they will still have to ask themselves what those jobs are for. How will the job I’m preparing for—how will it serve God by serving other people? How will it clean a lake instead of polluting it? How will it offer opportunity to marginalized people rather than crowd them still further out of the center of things? How will it add to people’s hunger for justice and maybe partially satisfy it? In other words, how will the knowledge, skills, practices, and values of my Christian education be used to restore a little order within the human madhouse or recover some part of the lost loveliness of God’s world or introduce some novel beauty into society? That is, how do my education and work make for shalom?

Obviously beyond knowledge and skills (fourth observation) I’m talking now about adding values and developing virtues. I’m talking about the way an education tells us what knowledge and skills are for, why they matter, and to what use God intends them to be put.

Will we use our education mostly to enrich ourselves, or in some variety of ways to make human life flourish for others? Do we use a career to gain a reputation or to regain some kind of well-being in God’s world? Is a profession used to play angles and cut corners, or instead to lift and straighten some part of a crooked creation?

Let me give a homely example. A manufacturer who puts out an honestly-built piece of furniture at a fair price is anticipating and previewing the new heaven and earth. He is fashioning from trees and cotton and synthetic fiber, from metal and glue and rubber—he is fashioning a genuinely useful, and maybe a beautiful, thing and in the process is providing for other women and men a chance to do significant work.

But suppose somebody uses his expensive Christian education in order to fill orders for financial products he doesn’t understand and which he knows his own company is betting against. Suppose he publishes airline flight schedules he knows are hopelessly unrealistic and which will strand and frustrate thousands. Suppose he uses his math skills not as a bookkeeper, but as a bookie. One of the things a Christian education ought to do is help us at least to question such things. An educated Christian will raise the question whether some jobs and some products are important or honest enough to spend years working on. And the educated student will judge their importance and honesty by the likelihood that they will really contribute to shalom.

Good Practices within the Co-curriculum

The curriculum in a Christian university is very likely to form the student into an agent of shalom, a witness to it, maybe even a model of it to some degree. But (fifth and last observation) the non-academic side of university life is just as likely to help—and in some cases more likely to help.¹¹

A number of Christian educators have lately been talking a lot about the shaping power of various *practices* on Christian campuses. Their conviction is that we are more often shaped by our practices than by mere ideas. “What we do with and among others shapes who we become.”¹² So a Christian university might begin each academic year with the non-academic practice of a community service day. Led by staff who have shalom on their minds, students roof, paint, rake, mow, pick up, and generally put things to rights for people who can’t. This is simply the way you start a university year. It’s a ritual practice.

The same goes for spring break service trips. A certain number of students each year goes not to Daytona Beach to party but to the Mississippi delta to roof, paint, rake, mow, pick up, and generally put things to rights for people who can’t. The persons who accompany the students are obviously a key. Maybe they are faculty or maybe they are staff, but in any case they are critical to the success of the venture. They may have something brief and lovely to say to students about shalom, or the kingdom of God, or “the least of these,” or the common good. But students will be absorbing as well the leader’s attitudes and practices—his respect for students, her respect for the people served, his humor, her faith. There is something about gathering over a shared project in unfamiliar circumstances with a familiar and wise mentor that can be golden for Christian university students.

“What we do with and among others shapes who we become.”

Let’s recall Paul Gagnon’s observation that “failure teaches us more than victory does,” and add that it does so not just in the big movements of history. One of the most formative moments on campus is when a high school high achiever, jostling for position with other former high school high achievers, comes to college and falters.¹³ She gets cut during cross country tryouts. He gets cut during campus choir tryouts. She receives her first “C.” He tries out for a role in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and fails. Astonishment, dismay, self-doubt, depression—anything might follow the failure, but pain is likely to be ingredient in it.

In any properly functioning university, students are told plainly during orientation where to go for help. In a Christian university students may expect expanded resources because the Chaplain and staff are available, because campus worship includes psalms of lament that nourish our faltering student as does the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, and because, even outside the Chaplain’s Office, residence assistants, counseling staff, and faculty advisors will include some mature Christians.

Mature Christian counselors on campus guide our faltering student back toward the light. I won’t try to reproduce their method, but I know it will include unmistakable empathy and kindness. Counselors are also unlikely to miss an opportunity to remind students that their worth centers in

being a loved child of God, created in dignity with the very image of God—a dignity that failure may scuff but never shatter. Above all, the Counselor may wonder with the student what may be learned from a dismaying failure. It feels awful, but is it? Could this failure be God’s nudge of a student in a new direction?

A student who gets drunk and disorderly on a city street may be apprehended by a cop and fined by a judge. A student on a Christian campus may be apprehended by a Campus Safety officer and then counseled by a mature Christian in the University’s Student Life division—a mature Christian whose idea of discipline may include a penalty, but will certainly include God’s grace and truth about the meaning of the student’s behavior and the opportunity to learn something from it.¹⁴

Service days, spring break trips, wise counselors—all of them help students flourish who then may help others flourish. So does a great cross country coach who imbues students with the spirit of Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* (“God made me *fast* and when I run I feel his pleasure”). So does a campus job under a truly vital and humane supervisor. So does a circle of friends that includes some serious, practicing Christians. They may end up in each other’s weddings one day. They may influence each other’s career paths. They may save each other from behavioral risks. They may certainly be a significant part of what parents are buying for their children when parents pay substantial tuition at an excellent Christian university.¹⁵

Or consider a violinist in the University orchestra. She’s good enough to sit outside second stand in the first violin section. After solid practicing she can play much of her orchestra’s repertoire both in tune and up to tempo, and she loves to do it. This phenomenon is a small burst of shalom all by itself. The student’s heart warms to beauty that delights both her and others and is therefore in tune with the Creator. Just as she delights in an unspoiled toddler or in the velvety ears of her family’s Labrador retriever, so our student plays the first motif in Mendelssohn’s *Fourth Symphony* and it restores her soul.

Music doesn’t always delight, of course. Some music disturbs or alarms. It’s concussive, aggressive, wake-up music. It’s protest music and it reminds us forcefully that we do not yet have shalom.

But some music delights, and the student’s conductor sometimes comments that it is no small thing to generate beauty that delights both us and our listeners. In one Thursday rehearsal, he helps students to see that by their playing they have the power to move the hearts of other creatures of God, in fact, to become ingredient in their joy. The student starts to get the feeling that in orchestra she is part of a celebration and that, within it, she may even become ingredient in the joy of God. Later in the rehearsal, to suggest an appropriate attitude as students begin to play the slow movement of Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, the conductor says, simply, “Pray.”

That night, after the violinist says “Our Father” and climbs in bed, she imagines a God who revels in beauty, who is almost boyishly enthusiastic about beauty. It occurs to her that maybe her orchestra’s audience is not just the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but also the angels and archangels. Also

the saints and martyrs. She wonders whether even when she plays alone she may not be the only listener. So she begins more and more to think of her playing as an offering.

Most of the time she generates music with others. The sheer fact of ensemble playing adds layers to our student's delight. She gets to mesh her sound with that of others, including a number of her good friends. Violins, violas, cellos, and string basses each have a distinctive range and sound. Outside the string section, French horns are flaring, clarinets are doodling, flutes are fluting, and the sole English horn is gently wailing.

I can't quite describe the beauty of this phenomenon and how much it instills unfulfillable longing inside our student, but I can suggest an analogy: God has arranged creation to fill with distinctive presences. An elephant is a ponderous presence. When it speaks it trumpets. A small terrier is a yippy and yappy presence. A pig grunts and roots. A flock of geese in a November fly-by is full of honking. Every creature acts in character. They express their presence by trumpeting or yipping or grunting or honking.

Something similar happens in an orchestra. When the violins sing and the clarinets doodle and the flutes flute and the horns flare and the tympani resonate—each in its distinctive voice but all meshed together—then you have music, a gift of God being represented to God and to anybody else who is listening. By fitting her voice in with all the others, the student is playing in one of the great festivals of creation. Her participation forms her right down to blood and bone. She is generating a piece of music and therefore a piece of shalom and she is doing it outside the university's academic curriculum.

Sometimes the very atmosphere of life on campus—an atmosphere generated by student organizations centering on justice, by shared assumptions about what Christians owe to the glory of God in the common good, by rituals of service, by homilies in campus worship—can become good contagion, touching everybody with a Godly infection. Students may skip campus worship and never hear a campus homily but still be unable to step outside the University's Christian atmosphere. It's too pervasive.

If you will forgive a personal example: my younger son, Adam, graduated from Marquette University with an A.B., but also with a Jesuit service ethic.¹⁶ He caught it at school. So, right out of university, he served for a number of years in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Houston as a counselor in a refuge for homeless kids. He saw a lot of desolation and waded all the way into it, doing what he could to address it.

He has since lived out his Marquette education as a cop.¹⁷ His attitude toward life on the job would make him an easy member of the Reagan family of cops—good Catholics, every one of them—in the CBS TV show *Blue Bloods*.

“I Saw the Holy City Coming Down out of Heaven”

At a good Christian university, students learn knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices that may contribute to shalom. It may turn out that this matters not only for this world but also for the world to come.

My reason for thinking so is that Scripture appears to teach not only that there shall be a new heaven and earth, but also that it shall be *this* earth, renewed. In Revelation 21 the city of God descends to us. We do not go to heaven; heaven comes to us. In a vision lovely enough to break a person’s heart, John shows us what God showed him, that up ahead of us, after centuries of tribal feuds and racial arrogance, after centuries of xenophobic snapping at each other, after we human beings have silted history full with the debris of all our antagonisms—after all that, the city of God will descend to us, and God will dwell with us, and, once more, God will make all things new.

The Old Testament prophecies of shalom—of perfect justice, harmony, and delight among God, human beings, and all creation—apply neither to the present church (of which in any case they are not true) nor to a future existence in a distant, airy heaven. These prophecies apply to the future of a very solid, tangible, visible earth.¹⁸ Or to the earth and a number of other planets. Saraksan National Park in northeast Korea will be a part of heaven. So will the coasts of Cornwall in England, the Schwarzwald of Southwest Germany, and the Great Barrier Reef off the eastern coast of Australia. Lake Michigan will be included and the islands of Indonesia. Kenya’s game preserves will still draw visitors, and so will the mighty Amazon River.

In this vision, one can spot lines of continuity between the work of Christ in the present and in the future, between the small whispers and hints now, and the final cosmic renewal and triumph of the Lamb. What we do now in the name of Christ—striving for healing, for justice, for intellectual light in darkness, striving simply to produce something helpful for sustaining the lives of other human beings—shall be preserved across into the next life. All of it counts, all of it lasts, none of it is wasted or lost. All of it acts like salt that eventually seasons a whole slab of meat, or a seed that grows one day into a tree that looks nothing like the seed at all.

For there is both cultural continuity and transformation in the link between this world and the next. As we know, twisted culture now fills the earth. God’s mandate to “multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28) has too often been answered by strip mines, oil slicks, and denuded rain forests; too often by dictatorships and ethnic cleansing; too often by computerized dope distribution schemes. Great scientists use their excellent minds to dream up weapons that find their way into the hands of terrorists. TV writers put a good face on godlessness. Ministers use their seminary training to preach gospels in which all the difficult bits about sin and grace have been razored away. “Fill the earth,” God says in Genesis 1. And the earth is now full. The trouble is that it’s full of our trash as well as God’s treasure.

Remarkably, God wants the earth anyhow. God wants it back. Why? What's the point? The earth's trash is, after all, the product of our fallenness, of our disobedience. It's the product and encouragement of human arrogance. Why doesn't God flush it all away with another deluge?

Because God has promised to preserve the earth. As you recall, Genesis 9 records God's promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood. The point is that the earth is the Lord's. The point is that the earth *in all its fullness* is the Lord's. God means to reclaim the fullness. But just as you and I have to be converted, so does all of culture. Swords will have to be turned back into pruning shears, switch-blades into paring knives, and spears into garden hoes. High-powered dope-running speedboats—cigarette boats—will have to be reclaimed for teaching poor children to waterski. In the new heaven and earth, intercontinental ballistic missile silos will be transformed into training tanks for scuba divers.¹⁹

In a thousand ways, God will gather what's scattered, rebuild what's broken, restore what has been emptied out by centuries of waste and fraud. In a thousand ways, God will put right what's wrong with the glorious creation. In fact, the Bible hints that the new heaven and earth may *surpass* the original creation: marriage, for instance, shall no longer be necessary for human fellowship at its deepest level (Mk. 12:25).

The earth is the Lord's, in all its fullness. We have corrupted the earth through folly and sin, but God means to restore all things in the harmony, justice, and delight of shalom. This is a sign to us: On the third day Jesus Christ rose again from the dead, the pledge that one day all things shall be renewed. And God has called the followers of Christ to become agents, witnesses, and models for the restoration project that is already in process. These agents need to be educated. More than we could ever think or say, Christian higher education is for this project. Christian education is the training of special agents of the kingdom of God and the consummation of creation.

Notes

1. Beethoven's offsetting compensation was, of course, a transcendent and unique ability to compose gloriously though deaf.
2. Ferguson 2013.
3. Isa 2:2–4; 11:1–9; 32:14–20; 42:1–12; 60; 65:17–25; Joel 2:24–29; 3:17–18.
4. Irenaeus 1885, 5.33.3.
5. Years ago I derived the central part of my understanding of shalom from my teacher Nicholas Wolterstorff and especially from his 1983 book titled *Until Justice and Peace*

Embrace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

6. Another idea from Nicholas Wolterstorff. See Wolterstorff 2004, especially chapter 2, titled “Teaching for Shalom: On the Goal of Christian Collegiate Education.”
7. Let’s let “university” stand for both colleges and universities.
8. See Wolterstorff 2004, 22–26.
9. Gagnon 1988.
10. In imitation of G. K. Chesterton and his brother Cecil: “My brother [...] was born when I was about five years old; and, after a brief pause, began to argue. He continued to argue to the end. [...] I am glad to think that through all those years we never stopped arguing; and we never once quarreled. Perhaps the principal objection to a quarrel is that it interrupts an argument” (Chesterton 1937, 196).
11. I am indebted and grateful for much wisdom on these matters to Dr. Mary Hulst, Chaplain of Calvin College, and to Shirley Hoogstra, J. D., Vice-President for Student Life at Calvin College. Both women have educated me in co-curricular matters over the years and, most recently, in conversations of July 2014.
12. See Smith and Smith 2011, 6. The Smiths acknowledge, among others, the pioneering work on practices of Alasdair MacIntyre, Craig Dykstra, and Dorothy Bass.
13. Mary Hulst, conversation, July 10, 2014.
14. Shirley Hoogstra, conversation, July 11, 2014.
15. Mary Hulst, conversation, July 10, 2014.
16. In fine phrasing Michael J. Buckley speaks of the orientation of the Jesuit order: “that all of its academic commitments have as an essential dimension a concern for justice within this ravaged world, that somehow or other the education of its students engage the misery that is the lot of the majority of human beings” (Buckley 1998, xix).
17. See Plantinga 2014.
18. Hoekema 1979, 281–87.
19. Mouw 1983, 16–20.

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