Faith and Education: Asking the Questions
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Greetings! I am thankful that you have come to share in this program as we work together to maintain a sense of the high calling of the community of higher education. It is a great honor to be able to speak here. It is also, a great challenge to be placed in the midst of a great university to discuss and reflect on the power of possibility in the process of higher education.

This afternoon, I will give what I understand to be personal testimony! I understand that this terminology is religious, but I wish to reinforce the idea that personal experience is an important part of what later becomes theory and intentional practice. This opportunity to discuss and experience educational formation with you will be a time to reflect on the continuing mandate to review the possible resources for learning and growth in our various communities.

Again, I thank you for allowing me to reflect on the experience of my own educational process, and the continuing mandate to create and sustain an appropriate and highly responsive environment for the educational experience.

The focus for our presentations and discussions is on a celebration of religion in the Western Reserve. The task that I have taken on is to reflect on the college experience at Hiram, one of the early institutions of learning established here in the Reserve. Early on, formed as the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute in 1849, by the Christian Church, the name was changed in 1867 to Hiram College, as it is known today. For me, the experience of a college education was inextricably tied to, what I understand to be the intention and resolve of a religious community, the Christian Church, part of the restoration movement of the early portion of the nineteenth century. The creation of institutions of learning, and higher education, was a major enterprise of faith communities in the nineteenth century. As the boundaries of the English colonial frontier expanded from the east, so too did the responsibility of the settlers to create the ways and means of survival for the people in the “new world”. Whereas churches were an expected outgrowth of the westward movement, so then was the need to create centers of learning to maintain the various centers of life. Ohio was and is a big college state, and in the Western Reserve remain some of the earliest and best examples of institutions of higher education in the United States of America. These dozens of church colleges were created in response to the needs of faith communities and for the purpose of building stable and responsible human communities. Although many of these colleges have drifted from the stated purposes of their various charters, a fine, solid and personal education can still be obtained in the four year, church related liberal arts college.

It is my task to share in the celebration of religion in the Western Reserve by recreating for you a legacy of faith and learning, as the substantive experience provided by the four years at Hiram College, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Background

I was fortunate to be blessed with the commitment of my parents who provide a sound religious and educational foundation for life. My early years of education were spent in an eight year Episcopal elementary school. St. Edmund’s Parochial School emphasized reading, the arts and study of the classics; with substantive religious education. My secondary education was at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools High School. This fifteen year school was developed in the latter years of the nineteenth century by the educational theorist and philosopher, John Dewey. In both environments curriculum was never ever stagnant, and learning was never ever “normative”. The times, the child, the mood were all applicable and relevant considerations for a learning session. In these very formative and non-static places I was taught, from the first grade to; “Ask the questions!” Thus my formation has been informed and shaped by a willingness, even a mandate to investigate.

It is my suggestion that, hand in hand the religious and educational environments in which I was
placed to learn provided a correct and hopeful background for a grand and continuing spirit of learning.

**THE THEORIES: Education and Formation, John Dewey and the Disciples of Christ**

The nineteenth century was a rather busy place of preparation, for those who pioneered in religious and educational institutions. My own involvement in this century of ideas was at once, as a member of the newly forming Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and as a student experiencing secondary education in a John Dewey school. Both of these "idea" communities were a kind of "in process" environment.

John Dewey formed his Laboratory School, and his educational theory in response to a country that was moving from an agricultural and frontier nation to an urban and industrial nation. Dewey believed in the continual reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation of experience. He posited that there is a connection between what we do to things (places, people, circumstances) and what happens as a result. His focus was on the perception of the relationship or continuities among events. Dewey believed that in the doing of the ordinary there is a resultant relationship.

For John Dewey, education was primarily an activity that arises from grappling with a problem. This was a revolutionary concept in the latter part of the nineteenth century. For educational curriculum that meant, no more passive information. His forms of learning would include little or no memorization, no straight lecturing and little repetition of dates and facts. In the Dewey movement, the learner was an explorer who maps unknown territory. Each learner is involved in the exploration of ideas and concepts. Learners wrestle with conditions, devise solutions, and combine data. That data: experience, information, results and the observation of relationships, all come together to form solutions to problems. For Dewey, in the desirable environment for learning, each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the group in which s/he was born to come in contact with a broader or bigger community. There, the individual shares in the determining and achieving of common purposes, and in so doing works for the common purposes of the entire community.

Now, consider the "progressive education" movement in relationship to its predecessor the "Campbellite Movement", as it begins to organize churches and schools in the earlier portion of the 1800's. The founders of the Christian Church movement believed in "no creeds". For them faith grows with active participation. They were committed to intellectual freedom, reform and flexibility in response to people that were shaped by a frontier, not by boundaries. Their colleges and schools were started for the purposes of shaping an environment that seeks "wholeness of persons", that is formation of the physical, intellectual, and moral character. These frontier colleges and schools, always set up for women and men, set out to teach justice, compassion and generosity. These attributes were thought to be the best expressions of a good education. Curriculum included: Biblical studies, a non-sectarian approach to philosophy and religion and something called "formation of character".

Shaped by the frontier and constant movement, the founders of the faith held as primary in value; freedom to explore, freedom for all of the participants in the community and full participation of learner/participants to affirm the unity of the community, and the dignity and humanity of each person.

Hiram College was itself founded by the Christian Church movement in the Western Reserve, in response to the somewhat ambivalent stance of the church fathers to the condition of slavery. The northern Western Reserve Disciples took a firm stance against slavery, much as the founders of Oberlin College, which is the end of the underground railroad, and was the beginning of a entire new and very well educated life for Black Americans. At Hiram, established for men and women, the Disciple movement which from its inception was committed to higher education, established a school for: 1.) education for ministry, 2.) development of culture, and 3.) retaining of young people as leaders. Hiram from its beginnings has produced graduates for the service professions; teachers,
ministers, lawyers, those in the medical and biological professions and writers. It is one of the 129 institutions of learning established by the Christian Church movement in the nineteenth century, of which 18 survive.

The Times

Now, please consider the times! It is my firm belief that the responsibility of all educational environments is to provide a text, context and a foundation for survival. That was the work of the college in my times, and the church in my lifetime. In the heart of the sixties and in the heart of the Western Reserve are the hard won lessons of life that I would like to share with you this afternoon.

For me faith and education were and are inextricably bound. In a place and time where new tools were required for what we in the sixties called “the revolution”, a mental a spiritual readiness to explore was a requirement for survival. I learned that mapping out territory and defining and redefining boundaries were as much a task of my education as was learning an “official text”. The times were hard. The sixties saw the height of the civil rights movement, the assassination of four American leaders in one short decade, and the unforgivable murder of youth by the American government at Kent State. The educational arena was an environment of changing boundaries and relationships. The institutions of learning were struggling, every day to be born into reality, and the only way to survive was to “Ask the Questions” and begin again to participate in the practice of “map-making”.

The Questions!

The questions return time and again. They are the result of and the response to a formal education that adopts no boundaries, draws no lines, and determines no exclusive or definitive formulations for community life and health. Instead, my posture is to suggest that education and human community fall directly behind the responses to the questions of human value which must be asked over and over and over again.

What are the questions that link a tradition of faith and the mandate of education?

1. What do you know, from whence do you come, what is your corporate and personal history?
2. How do experiences of relationships (family, faith community, social and economic environment) invite growth?
3. With whom do you share your thoughts, ideas, dreams, desires, and passions?
4. Who are your friends?
5. What is your vision, understanding of the human race (who is human)?

The Transforming Relationships

In my faith and education, the partnership of a progressive education with a frontier spirit, I have thrived because of particularly powerful relationships and expressions from persons involved in my formative years.

My parents in their working commitment to bond faith and education, early on set out to put me in situations where I would have to learn, with the attainment of the school room skills, how to map out relations and how to communicate with persons and ideas that are unfamiliar to a young inner-city child. They warned me against judgment and the drawing of hard lines and boundaries and they modeled that philosophy in their own relationships, and with constant and consistent spiritual growth and nurture alongside a challenging education.

In my church, in my teenage years, the mid-sixties, I was highly influenced and even charged up by four Hiram College students who took seriously the ideas of forging, in their daily lives, past preset ideas and boundaries. In their relationships with me, a Black inner-city teenager; Bill, Emily, Karl and Marshall combined the best of what I understand to be “church” people with a willingness to learn from and be open to people with a different history and background. All of these persons, white and raised in homogeneous communities were connected to a spirit of life and possibility and
hope because of their and our understanding of what the church is to be for all persons. All of them risked intimacy and questions, confusion and controversy, to forge a new definition of human value and to build new relationships. Bill and Emily, Karl and Marshall made me want to know what kind of life of the mind and spirit was happening at Hiram College.

Finally, and perhaps most important to why I am who I am today, I cherish all of the horror and hope from four years of life and learning at Hiram College in the Western Reserve in the years 1968 to 1972. The teaching profession was never better, as far as I am concerned. I have been involved in the life of fourteen colleges and universities across the United States and I would not trade my Hiram education for any other.

There was abundant in those days a deep antagonism and the pained confrontation of the times, with the evil of racism. It was real and it was hard and it was, and still is at my Alma Mater a reality of that educational environment. Teaching faculty was and is unbalanced, curriculum was narrow, and students from a variety of backgrounds worked hard to understand one another. But in the midst of this place there was and is a professional—a professor who taught me that to learn is to be inspired. That truth is part of my religion, and the basis of my celebration of a difficult, yet triumphant experience of education. To find in your heart, and in your mind and in the text of your learning environment that which calls forth your passion; that is to know the limitless of all human boundaries and the excellence of the bond between education and faith.

That is for the ultimate question, “What is it that stirs my passion?”

And from day to day that is how I understand and determine my tasks and priorities as an educator and a person of faith. This powerful connection was made for me in the classroom under the tutelage of Professor David Anderson who still holds forth in the teaching of literature at Hiram College.

In the Questions are the Solutions!

My accustomed style of teaching is preaching. It is an age-old practice of “talking at” people (and dare I say hoping that they will listen at least part of the time), and working at an interpretation of words, ideas and concepts that are held in common by the faith community to be sacred. In that tradition, I share my closing thoughts with you. These few reflections are what I understand to be the constant solutions to the questions of faith, and the dilemma of constructing a grand and viable education.

First, knowledge, all knowledge, is the grappling with and the comprehension of history. It is knowing and discerning and struggling to understand and discern the truth.

Next, all learning and all faith are composed of scientific inquiry. Each person must learn for her/himself the relationships between ideas and results. Active involvement in a life of faith and an educated life is active exposure to a variety of ideas, issues and situations. It is jumping in heart and mind to first hand experience and the building of first hand, or primary source relationships.

Then one must reflect. And reflection is composed of honest and confrontational dialogue and investigation with persons in the community with whom trust and openness is built and nurtured.

The solution to our questions of faith and education that we wish to resolve in the creation of new human communities and better understanding, requires of us a willingness to speak and to hear in a common language. Men and women old and young, student and professor, pastor and congregant, immigrant and twelfth generation American are mandated to; listen and hear and create a new language; “a community speak” whose basic text upholds that which all human beings have in common.

Finally, and with whole heart, I commend to you as a solution for our questions of faith and education, the spirit of the pioneer. Exceed your limits, take a broad view, travel, move, relate, investigate, but move beyond that which your eyes can see. Take a risk to plot new ground in the human race to community.
As always, I will close with words from the sacred text of my faith; the New Testament of the Holy Bible. From the Gospel of Matthew in the final chapter, the twenty-eighth, beginning with verse 19 and following, are these words:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

In this final command to his followers, Jesus tells them to make disciples of all nations. And that we must be, for a disciple is a follower of Christ for some, but for all of us to be a disciple is another solution to our questions. For a disciple is a student, a student of life and faith and practice and one that receives the inspiration and the power and the affirmation of the teacher. I invite you to join me in making disciples in our communities as we learn to live and grow together; expanding the boundaries of human relationships and mapping out new territory for our corporate future.

May knowledge and peace abide with one and all........