

Educating for Shalom: Our Calling as a Christian College

The great writing prophets of the Bible knew how many ways human life had gone wrong because they knew how many ways human life can go right. And they dreamed of a time when God would put things right again.

They dreamed of a new age in which crookedness would be straightened out, rough places made plain. The foolish would be made wise, and the wise, humble. They dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would stream with red wine, a time when weeping would be heard no more, and when people could sleep without weapons on their laps. People could work in peace, their work having meaning and point. A lion could lie down with a lamb, the lion cured of all carnivorous appetite. All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; 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 and recognition welling up from valleys and crags, from women in streets and from men on ships.

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Old Testament prophets called *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or cease-fire among enemies. In the Bible *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights.

We are now fallen creatures in a fallen world. The Christian gospel tells us that all hell has broken loose in this sorry world but also that, in Christ, all heaven has come to do battle. Christ the warrior has come to defeat worldly power, to move the world over onto a new foundation, and to equip a people—informed, devout, educated, pious, determined people—to follow him in righting what's wrong, in transforming what's corrupted, in doing the things that make for peace.

That's what Christian higher education is for. It's for *shalom*. It's for peace in the sense of wholeness and harmony in the world. It's for restoring proper relationships with nature and other humans and God, and for teaching us to delight in the wonders of creation that remain. As my teacher Nicholas Wolterstorff used to say, Christian college education equips us to be agents of *shalom*, models of *shalom*, witnesses to *shalom*.

I believe we could summarize our calling in Christian college education as follows: in an academic setting, with the peculiar tools, perspectives, and resources of academe, we have to equip ourselves with the knowledge, the skills, and the attitudes that can be thrown into the struggle for *shalom*, the battle for universal wholeness and delight. The calling is exceedingly broad. We must never narrow it down to personal piety. But our role in the calling at this place is particularly academic: we must not confuse it with the role of other Christian agencies. So what we need is an extraordinarily broad concept of the general Christian project in the world combined with a sufficiently restricted and academic concept of our present role in preparing to take our place in this project.

As C.S. Lewis once said, we are trying to retake territory that has been captured by the enemy. We are trying to recapture society, culture, and all creation for Jesus Christ. We will need the right attitudes for this recapturing program, including the attitude of delight.

So in a Christ-centered college we learn what we can about creation itself. We learn the functions and beauty of numbers and sets of numbers; we learn the wonder of cells and cell division. In *The Medusa and the Snail* Lewis Thomas, a truly distinguished scientist, wonders at all the fuss over test-tube babies. The real marvel, he says, is not the change of incubators, but rather the sheer joining of sperm and egg and the cell that eventually emerges from this union—a cell that can grow into a human brain. "The mere existence of that cell should be one of the greatest astonishments of the earth. People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell."

We study and teach history, as Paul Gagnon has observed, in order, among other things, to develop *judgement*. We want to understand from a biblical point of view what is comic and what is tragic in a fallen world, and how strikingly often they combine. We must learn not to be surprised when "failure teaches us

more than victory does" as Gagnon puts it, or when triumph eventually curdles into folly. Christians have a general explanation for such surprises. Sheer gratitude makes us thankful for even provisional historical solutions, but our knowledge of human perversity leads us to do so with a tinge of irony.

We learn 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 us to understand the world in which we 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 for us to expect to serve and transform a world we do not know.

We learn in literature classes the best that's been thought and said. Reading fiction, for instance, is an excellent way to learn something about human character. We learn (as we would by reading the biblical account of King David) how possible it is for great goodness and great wickedness to cohabit in a single person. We learn to distinguish in human character between what is merely bizarre, between what is truly vital and what is only enthusiastic. As we read and ponder and discuss, our knowledge of human character deepens and becomes subtle. It's part of our equipment as peace agents. No business group, no army, no task force, no basketball team is sent out to serve clients or engage foes without knowing their character and habits, without trying, so to speak, to climb inside their skin. And so it is with Christian students reading fiction. It's required training for the peace corps.

But Christian college education isn't only a matter of knowledge. It includes skills as well. We learn how to read, and how to read critically. We learn how to compute and how to do it precisely. We learn how to experiment, and how to do it scrupulously. We learn how to write better so as to equip ourselves to spread the truth and to do it really efficiently.

In physical education we gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are natural for embodied creatures who, even as adults, must play. Part of our calling as delighted creatures of God is to be playful. War, for instance, isn't playful. Football is. A prominent mistake is to confuse these things.

In art and music we learn to delight in sheer beauty and to distinguish what is lovely from what is merely loud, what is graceful from what is garish.

In all these areas and many others we become equipped. Of course we become equipped for jobs. But that's not the final point of college education. The reason is that as Christian people we shall still have to ask what those jobs themselves are for. How will the job I'm preparing for serve God by serving other people? How will it clean a lake instead of polluting one? How will it offer opportunity to marginalized people rather than crowd them still further out to the rim of things? How will it yield an honestly built product or genuinely useful service that will anticipate the new heaven and earth? In other words, how will the knowledge, skills, and values of my Christian college education—how will these things be used to clear some part of the human jungle, or restore some part of the lost loveliness of God's world, or introduce some novel beauty into it? *That is, how do my education and work make for shalom?*

In the things that clean and clarify, in the things that build and rebuild, in the things that bring light and delight—in all things that make for shalom, may the Lord bless and keep us and cause his face to shine on us, and be gracious to us and give us his peace.

—Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

*Dr. Plantinga is a '67 Calvin graduate and the President of Calvin Theological Seminary. He is the author of several books, including **Not the Way It's Supposed to Be** (Eerdmans, 1995), one of Christianity Today's "Books of the Year."*