

Only Connect

Letter from the President from the Spring 2010 Bellarmine Magazine

“Only connect....”

-*Howards End*, E.M. Forster

In Bellarmine’s communication with prospective students, you’ll see the tagline, “Knowledge. Values. Connections.” I have been giving a great deal of thought lately to that last word.

“Connections” can, and does, have several meanings on our campus. It means connecting important ideas, to each other and to applications in the real world. It means connecting with people, in the classroom and through internships, who will one day help you find satisfying employment. And, most important, it means authentic and open conversations, and arriving at new understandings that leave you feeling connected to the world.

Two readings I’ve come across in past weeks re-emphasize the value of connecting – and the alienation and loss of hope that occur when we fail to make connections:

In his soon-to-be-published book, *The Politics of the Broken-Hearted*, Parker Palmer, who has been so important here at Bellarmine with his *Courage to Teach*, writes: “I am not alone in my heartbreak about the way American democracy has been diminished as disagreement among its citizens turns to distrust, anger and hatred, undermining the civic community that can hold power accountable and help create a better future for our children. That kind of heartbreak spans the political spectrum—and in that shared pain lies hope.

“There are two ways for the heart to break: it can break apart in anger, or it can break open into a greater capacity to hold the tension of our differences. ‘Habits of the heart’ that make the heart supple, enabling it to break open, not apart, can help those of us who differ on the issues renew our sense of ‘we, the people’ on which democracy depends. ... In education, religion and various venues of public life, we have daily opportunities to develop habits of the heart that can renew democracy and help us resist the many forces that are bent on closing it down.”

Psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, meanwhile, in his fascinating book *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, posits that over the past 2,500 years, our culture has increasingly given emphasis to the brain’s left hemisphere, which is concerned with details, rules and unambiguous facts, while discounting the right hemisphere, which sees nuance and the interconnectedness of the bigger picture.

“And so our world has become increasingly rule-bound,” he writes. “Loss of the implicit damages our ability to convey, or even to see at all, aspects of ourselves and our world

that transcend the mechanistic. Perspective in art has receded along with harmony in music: We tend more and more to see the world as a heap of intrinsically meaningless fragments.”

In these times of political, economic and social fragmentation, “conversation” too often means posturing with one’s own position firmly intact, and with no desire – in fact, no *ability* – to hear or understand the other point of view. And so the university’s status as a haven of thoughtful engagement -- where every person may search for truth in open and free ways and learn to make connections -- has never been more important.

This is not Ivory Tower talk. In recent surveys, business and civic leaders overwhelmingly assert that the best preparation for the 21st Century world of work, regardless of the field, is a strong liberal-arts education.

“The only education that prepares us for change is a liberal education,” says David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox Corporation. “In periods of change, narrow specialization condemns us to inflexibility—precisely what we do not need. We need the flexible intellectual tools to be problem solvers, to be able to continue learning over time.”

At Bellarmine, of course, our curriculum has always been infused with the rich tradition of the liberal arts, with an emphasis on helping our students become critical thinkers and, in the spirit of Thomas Merton, ethical citizens, personally and socially responsible, alert to the interconnectedness of all life.

Knowledge. Values. Connections.

Bellarmino University is a place where persons are taken seriously; where they are heard and seen -- and where they hear and see others; a place to master knowledge and skills, to embrace big-heartedness and to care for each other.

Truly, a place to connect, with yourself, with others and with the world.

Dr. Joseph J. McGowan