

Passing on the common human tradition

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Introduction

We are here to share ideas on the “risk” of education as the book by Don L. Giussani is called. As we discuss his work, we are also discussing the nature and meaning of education as well as the process of education based on our own personal experiences in the field and keeping in mind our research into and analysis of that same teaching experience. As Don Giussani points out at various stages throughout the book, he is concerned here with the challenge and risk of educating adolescents in today’s world. In this workshop we will probably discover that many of the points made by the author apply to our situation too. In particular, Giussani is concerned about teenagers because they are at a stage where defiance and conformity without conviction (peer pressure) is combined with the fact that they are also becoming more aware of themselves as persons and of the meaning of the reality that surrounds them. Our university students are in a similar situation and so we are asking ourselves, how we can help them, how we ought to educate them in a way that responds to their own basic needs. The author proposes a method of education which contains five points and in this paper we will look at the second step in Giussani’s proposal: the issue of the role of tradition in education.

A University Education

Before addressing Don Giussani’s concept of tradition, I think that it is interesting to recall the context in which we are working. We are dealing with the education offered at university and so it is important to ask ourselves once again what a university education is all about. I think that is natural for us to go to that great classic work by J.H. Newman, known as *The Idea of a University*. There Newman speaks of how important it is that the university offer a “liberal” education, which he discusses while describing what he understands that a university should be. “It is a great point

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then to enlarge the range of studies which a University professes, even for the sake of the students; and, though they cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be gainers by living among those who represent the whole circle. This I conceive to be the advantage of a seat of universal learning, considered as a place of education. An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides him in his choice of subjects, and duly interprets for him those which he chooses. He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its light and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called ‘Liberal’” (Newman, 1975, pp. 60-61).

According to Newman, a university that offers a broad range of knowledge contributes to developing the minds of the students precisely because it teaches people how to think. “To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression” (Newman, 1975, p. 77). University education, therefore, ought to be concerned about the person being educated to ensure that he or she develops a variety of intellectual habits and attitudes that will make them be an asset to society.

Francisco Ponz, a Spanish thinker, has described what he calls the “characteristics” of the university man or woman. These include an awareness of the singularity and dignity of the human being as such; the desire to seek the truth with effort and intellectual rigour; intellectual humility; the desire to share the truth and openness to truth wherever it may be found; fidelity to truth; love for freedom; and the desire to serve society with one’s knowledge (Ponz, 1997, p. 60). All of these features contribute to making the university student have a broader and more flexible approach to life and understanding of the world. The university should educate the person as a “whole” and, in particular, should develop cultured and cultivated minds.

The University today

These are high ideals which, perhaps, we do not always have present in our own research and teaching practices, partly due to the situation we find in universities today. In the Kenyan context, from the physical point of view we are often faced with poor infrastructure, lack of facilities, and other difficulties. However, perhaps the greatest problem is the education system that we inherit from the schools. Students arrive at university with the desire to become technocrats, people who know how to do specific, technical tasks in whatever field, but without the desire to know the truth. They have learnt how to memorize data and repeat it in exams and they want to continue doing this at university. They want to know what they must know in order to pass the exams and

then move on. As a result we are producing graduates who can perform certain tasks but who cannot think, who do not know who they are or where they are going in the deeper sense of the word. Their goal is to make money and be successful, which in itself is not wrong. But there is more to life than that! And so we come to Don Giussani's approach to education which is of interest to us because it offers a more "holistic" vision of the educative process.

The Role of Tradition

Having discussed the meaning of education as openness to the fullness of reality in this morning's session, we now need to take a look at the role of tradition in education. According to Don Giussani, loyalty to tradition is important in education because it offers a sense of security and certainty to the student. This arises from the fact that a person's tradition reveals values and offers an understanding of the meaning of the real world. Ultimately, tradition serves as a reference point in our knowledge and analysis of the world as we find it today. But what is tradition for Giussani? He understands it to be "the whole structure of values and meanings into which a child is born" (Giussani, 1996, p. 52). Ideally, each person is born into a family which forms part of a specific community that has its own culture, values, customs and practices, which have a meaning and which form part of the life of all those born into this tradition. In such a context we can understand that tradition offers a sense of personal, family and cultural identity that helps a person know who they are, where they come from and where they are going. Tradition is thus a reference point in the person's interaction with other human beings and the broader world as he or she comes into closer contact with these realities, which are often different from their own.

In a multicultural society such as Kenya, the young student who joins the university will come across people from other parts of the country who speak differently, greet differently, have different beliefs and attitudes about life and death, marriage, family, and so on. Knowing that my people have always done things this way, may help an individual to be secure, certain, keep his sense of identity and find meaning in life. However, as he comes into contact with different traditions, customs and ways of doing things, he will compare them and perhaps begin to judge which "system" is better or worse. This variety of traditions can actually lead to confusion in the young person as well as conflict with his peers.

The deepest common tradition

So what type of "tradition" is Giussani referring to? If we are honest with ourselves, I think that we will recognize that he is referring to what we may call "Christian" tradition" (see pp. 36-38, 60, 116-124). He does so because he perceives that through this "tradition" we can reach "reality". As he says "I would like to stress that loyalty to what one has been taught and to the tradition in which the teenager's consciousness is formed is the backbone of any responsible education. First of all, because it is the foundation of that feeling of dependency without which reality is deformed,

distorted by presumption, altered by fantasy, or emptied by illusion. Second, it creates in us the habit of facing reality with the certainty that a solution exists, without which our very capacity of discovery and the creative energy in our relationship with the world would dry up” (pp. 63-64). Reality, the real world, therefore appears as something objective, something outside ourselves which we need to come into contact with and to accept as it is; when we do this we can discover its meaning. The author seems to be pointing to a deeper human tradition that goes beyond the varieties of cultures and traditions that characterize our world today; a “tradition” or “structure of values and meanings” that brings together and reaches to the root of that which is common in all other traditions. This deeper “human’ tradition is rooted in reality, that is in the way the world and the human being are made. I would propose that Giussani is suggesting that we need to know who and what we are as persons and what we are made for, in order to discover the meaning of life and be able to act in a way that respects the truth about ourselves. In this way we will know our “tradition” (value and meaning) and so be loyal to it in our behaviour.

Thus we are saying that the deepest, most radical tradition is actually made up of the deepest truth about the world and the human being. The challenge of being loyal to our tradition is the challenge to be loyal to our own way of being and that of the world in our free human activity. To help our young people be true to themselves we need to educate them in this truth, in this deepest human tradition. How can we go about doing this? As Giussani indicates (p. 62), the education in tradition, values and meaning, begins at home in the family. What can be done to further this education at university?

Teaching tradition at university

According to Newman, “education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character” (Newman, 1975, p. 70). In order to provide a true education we need to offer contents that can feed the mind with the meaning of reality and, at the same time, propose a way of life that respects that meaning through a clear value system. In my opinion to achieve this it is fundamental to offer students some core units in Philosophy while at the same time inviting them to adapt their personal conduct to a value system that reflects the truth about the human being and his destiny. According to my experience in teaching, this kind of approach a) helps the students to know the “contents” of the deepest human tradition, i.e., the truth about man, God and the world; b) it actually teaches them to think as they learn to reflect on their own personal experience and that of others; c) they are given the opportunity to develop their own personal convictions which will serve them as a reference point for their behaviour throughout their lives. At Strathmore we have some experience in teaching our degree students using this intellectual and practical approach.

Strathmore is still largely an “entrepreneurial” university. We aim at teaching our students in such a way that they are well prepared for the industry, both in the fields of commerce and information technology. However, from the start we have been aware of how important it is that our students learn to think, to know themselves and to act in an ethical manner in their

personal lives and in the workplace. To achieve this we have designed a course in Anthropology and Ethics which must be completed by every student before graduating, along with some other basic Humanities units which broaden their cultural horizons. Our core humanities include the following:

Year 1- first semester: Introduction to Ethics

The aim of this unit is to train in self knowledge, and to introduce the student to an ethics-based value system. Some of the topics covered are: Personal Ethics which includes character, personality and human virtues; Family Ethics which deals with family related issues; Bioethics which includes aspects on the stages of sexual development, courtship and marriage. When asked why they found this unit useful, students replied that it helped because in first year their morals are still being formed and that this unit gave them a “window” into the real world.

Year 1 – second semester: Philosophical Anthropology

Here we analyze the concept of human person following the definition of Boethius so that students can know and understand the human person better. They should learn to reflect on themselves as persons, discover their own dignity and learn to respect the dignity of other human beings. We then move on to study the various sources of activity in the person and how they interrelate harmonically: external and internal senses; appetites, feelings and emotions; intellect and the capacity to know the truth; the will and the capacity to love and want. We also study human sexuality and other aspects of the intersubjective dimension of the human person such as work and other interpersonal relationships.

Year 2 – first semester: Principles of Ethics

After having studied who and what the person is, in this unit we look at human activity by analyzing the voluntary act and human freedom; we reflect on the human desire and search for happiness; we consider the reference points for judging the morality of human activity: the natural law, conscience and right reason. We analyze the factors that influence the morality of our actions (object, end and circumstances) and the morality of certain types of acts; finally we study the virtues as the good qualities which permit the person to act habitually in a way that respects his nature and way of being. Through this unit, students ought to acquire a greater understanding of their own free activity, be able to determine the morality of their acts and aim at developing the virtues that contribute to personal maturity. The students have indicated that this unit is useful because it helps them search within themselves, and reflect on their own life

Year 3 – first semester: Political and Social Philosophy

The aim of the unit is to deepen the students' understanding of social institutions and the role of social interaction at all levels of society. By the end of the course they should be able to recognize the value of social relations, the need for political organization and the importance of fair play. The course contents include the study of the basic structures to be found in society, the family, social justice and order, professional relations and the meaning of man's vocation to work, as well as the common good. The history of political society is discussed, along with an analysis and evaluation of the various different political systems. Finally the students study the nature, origin and meaning of man's fundamental rights and duties.

Year 4 – second semester: Business Ethics

In this final subject the students are prepared more directly to think and act in an ethical manner in the business world through the study of principles such as professional competence, advertising, publicity and solicitation, integrity, objectivity and independence, confidentiality, ethical and legal use of software, conflicts of interest, rights and duties of the various stakeholders, etc.

Feedback from students

In a recent survey, we asked students whether these units make a difference in their lives and if so, why. They gave the following replies. Some said that ethical awareness improves one's conduct. Others said that it depends on how the person takes what they learn; if they take it positively, Ethics can help them. They also commented that learning the contents of these units is a slow process and so, any personal changes will not be immediate. Some students pointed out that man has a natural inclination to what is good, and so, any assistance given to facilitate this should be encouraged. They said that these units helped them to develop positive attitudes to life and the world. A number of students said that young minds are ready to learn and can incorporate new ideas more easily because their character is not yet fully formed, and that thinking about these issues stimulated their minds. Finally, another important point was made: do not try to change our lives but make us realize why it is important to change ourselves. Indeed, we can present good ideas and attractive value systems, but ultimately it is up to each person to decide whether or not they want to change themselves. This points to the importance of respecting the freedom of students in the educative process. But this topic will be dealt with later on in our workshop.

Through the study of these units the students come to discover the meaning of human existence and how to achieve happiness by doing good and avoiding evil in a manner that respects our nature as persons. This type of education in values leads young people to "the certainty that things in fact do have a meaning" (Giussani, 1996, p. 54). In this way they come to know that basic, common human "tradition" regarding values and meanings. We may quote Giussani again to confirm our point: "Nature builds each one of us with a specific material, in a precise context,

with a specific structure and unique way of acting, and then puts us into a universal comparison with this initial formula. This starting point is subsequently reformulated through the person's original use of freedom and intelligence, but it is only through obedience to this starting point that one may reformulate it with attention and human dynamism" (p. 57). Evidently, as we have said, once young people come to know this starting point they are still free to choose whether or not they will be "loyal" to "tradition" in their personal activity.

Some aspects regarding Methodology

Another issue that Giussani touches on is the educator-student relationship in which the educator should not impose arbitrarily, nor should the student passively receive what he is told. We are referring here to the "dependency" feature of human education. This is not a popular word and yet it expresses the reality of the teacher-student relationship. We are limited creatures and we do depend on others in many ways and fields; education is one of those. Naturally the student depends on the teacher to a large extent in order to acquire new knowledge. At the same time, it is true that nowadays there is a growing tendency towards "self-learning" whereby students become more actively involved in their own learning process.

However, for education in values to be effective, the lecturer needs to present students with practical, real, recognizable moral experiences while illustrating ideal behaviour with good reasons which the students can think through logically for themselves. In this manner they can perceive the attractiveness of a values oriented life style. Precisely, through reflection on experience and the real world, the students can come to know and understand the truth which, as Giussani says, "is the correspondence between one's self and reality, the meaning of existence" (p. 57). Finally, for education in values to be fruitful the student also needs to see that the lecturer's ideas and behaviour are coherent. If they hear you, as the lecturer, say one thing and they see you do another, your credibility is lost in their eyes and they will hesitate to believe what you tell them in the future. Education in values, therefore, is a call for moral consistency on the part of educators themselves.

Conclusion

The adventure of handing on a common human tradition through university education is an exciting challenge for everyone involved. At the same time, it assists the students in developing their own convictions about the meaning of life, their own personal value and how they ought to act in order to be true to themselves. They thus become able to meet other values and traditions without being alienated from their peers, precisely because their knowledge of the common human tradition is a source of certainty for them.

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