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Seeing Through

“We are put on this earth primarily not to see through one another but to see one another through.” From one of novelist Peter DeVries characters, this is good advice for those of us who teach at church-related liberal arts colleges. But underscore that word *primarily*, because seeing through one another is also an important part of a liberal arts education, including, nay, *especially*, at a liberal arts college of the church. When we juxtapose “seeing through one another” with “seeing one another through,” the latter probably sounds better, because “seeing through people” seems to connote unmasking our pathetic hypocrisies and exposing our self-serving rationalizations. Actually, it is sometimes important for us to do this to each other. Juries and judges are routinely obliged to do it, and sometimes parents, teachers, and even friends can best serve us by seeing through our subterfuges and – sometimes gently, other times sternly – forcing us to confess our lies, or helping us see through our own self-deceptions.

Keep in mind also that seeing through each other need not detect only our dark sides. It can give us an appreciative understanding of the problems, even the demons, that others confront, an awareness of extenuating circumstances that elicit empathy, sympathy, and, when necessary, a willingness to excuse mistakes and forgive sins. Thank God that God does this. The One who sees through us perfectly forgives us and does so without the humanity of seeing the log in one’s own eye while noting the splinter in another’s. The latter point underscores the value of our seeing through *ourselves*. It puts into context and balance the issues we see when we see through others.

Let “seeing one another through” be a metaphor of caring for one another. Then when we juxtapose it with “seeing through one another,” the latter is a metaphor that includes not just seeing *through*, but also seeing *with*, seeing *past*, and seeing *into* one another. Or, at least when we combine the two types of *seeing through*, we must admit the need for these additional metaphors, and probably others as well.

Let “seeing with” connote the friendly phenomenon that when we try genuinely to understand one another – carefully listen and not just look for chances to refute the other –

we often find unexpected common ground. And what a delightful thing consensus can be, especially when it is newly discovered. Psalm 133 is a celebration of agreement: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!...It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.” The reference to Mt. Hermon in the north and the mountains of Zion in the south alludes to the reunification of the northern and southern nations, and thereby also reveals, in hindsight, that the celebration was premature. The consensus did not last, and the tribes saw *past* rather than *with* each other.

Still, there is a lot more room for agreement and seeing with than we often realize, partly because in our contentious, litigious, and argumentative culture we try harder to see *through* than *with* one another. For, in a pluralistic society, even careful communication often leads not to agreement but to clarity about how deep and wide are the differences between us. The nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill thought that if we would just engage each other in free and frank conversations, the truth eventually would emerge and, naturally, so would agreement. He actually worried that his successfully opposing censorship would lead to unanimity. He even thought philosophers would have to be hired to play the devil’s advocate, to argue heresy just to keep the population on its cognitive toes and keep healthy disputation going. Of course, it turned out that Mill did not have to worry about too much agreement. Good conversations do tend to raise our awareness of possible common ground, but also tend to sharpen our disagreements.

And this sharpening can be healthy. Not only is disagreement interesting – and necessary for progress – too often the hope for consensus can overlook otherness and try to homogenize into a melting pot what should be seen as delightful differences or as difficult conflicts. That is why we must distinguish toleration from acceptance as well as indifference; it connotes the enduring of something we find disagreeable. Moreover, we should distinguish toleration, which involves not coercing one another’s behavior, from the question of whether we can respect a position with which we disagree. Although sometimes we can and should attribute our disagreement with another to inordinate ignorance, stupidity, or depravity, we must also recognize that often the disagreement, though very real and possibly disconcerting in our pluralistic world, involves reasonableness on all sides. Sometimes it is appropriate to say to someone else, “I do think you are wrong, but I also think your position is reasonable, and it’s one I respect.” This is

not a post-modern relativism of truth. You do think there is a right and wrong and you – perhaps with appropriate intellectual humility – think that you are right. But it is a relativism of justification; what is reasonable to believe is much wider than what is true.

Allen Bloom famously claimed in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* that the one thing liberal arts undergraduates believe or say for sure is that truth is relative. My experience is that Bloom is wrong. Rather, most students are trying to cope with the conflict of convictions, and trying to do so in a way that allows them to be true to themselves and still be appropriately open to the differences they experience all around them. Indeed, my experience in teaching ethics is that the most difficult problem for students is not arriving at their own reflective view about hot-button issues such as abortion or gay rights (though that can be hard enough); the most difficult problem is how to respond to the fact that others flatly disagree. If we could dismiss those who disagree as comparatively ignorant, corrupt, or unintelligent, the cognitive dissonance could readily be resolved. But the problem is that, too often, we have to admit that those who disagree seem to be as informed, good-willed, and as smart as we are, and sometimes, to our chagrin, even more so. And when students struggle with this, they sometimes say things that sound to Bloom like mindless relativism.

On study terms abroad, this problem is underscored for college students. We faculty usually encourage students to be broad-minded relativists on all sorts of issues having to do with cuisine, etiquette, and teaching styles. However students also encounter some moral and religious differences such that their own integrity and identity requires something other than either light-hearted acceptance or dogmatic dismissal. When students abroad study other religions, for example, they tend to get taught by committed practitioners of these religions, rather than by missionary opponents. So the courses are not catechisms of how heretics, infidels, and the deluded can go wrong, but loving portrayals of respectable viewpoints that, on at least some crucial matters, contradict students' own deepest moral and religious convictions. What is called for here is an appropriately nuanced perspective on pluralism, one that recognizes that the category of "probably wrong but definitely reasonable" helps us see with one another even as we are also obliged to see past one another. It allows us to *engage* disagreement in frank but civil

ways, to have open-minded respect for a view without either broadminded approval or shallow-minded dismissal.

Let us raise just one more metaphor: seeing *into* one another. When we look into one another or even into ourselves, what we see more often than transparency in depth, even mystery. And I don't mean mere murkiness, the dark stains that indicate confusion. Of course, we have to acknowledge that often we cannot be seen through just because we are all mixed up. Such confusion can be healthy. We sometimes envy those who always seem confidently to know what's up, but we should be suspicious also. The mark of a liberally educated person is to recognize and admit uncertainty, even when one is required to take a stand.

Thus sometimes lack of transparency is due to clouds of confusion, but often the impenetrable depth found in humans indicates, not confusion, but richness of personality and mystery of spirit and soul. We are not talking about simply being unpredictable, strange, or weird (someone once said of a former US president that he suffered from the disadvantage of being mysterious without being fascinating). Instead we are recognizing that persons cannot be summed up into a set of problems that can be solved. In terms of philosopher Gabriel Marcel's distinction between problems and mysteries, human problems are questions that we may hope to define well enough that we can investigate and answer them scientifically, while human mystery is such that even when we treat it as a problem, its data encroaches on itself in a way that the more we understand the more elusive and enigmatic it becomes.

Some scientific optimists think that science eventually will turn all mysteries into problems, and we cannot deny that well-placed National Science Foundation funds have done some of that with the human genome project, for example. However, I am quite certain that we will never reduce all mysteries to problems, though I must hasten to add that a few years ago I acquired an extremely good reason to be grateful for scientific problem-solving. Without any warning or symptoms, my heart stopped one Sunday morning after my wife, Lois, and I went for a walk and while I was doing some sit-ups. First it fibrillated, which means it went lickety-split, and then it got tired and, as I understand, arrested itself. Fortunately, Lois happened to hear me gurgle and came running downstairs and saved my life. She had just attended – somewhat begrudgingly –

an evening long workshop required by her profession of Dental Hygiene, a workshop about how to use CPR correctly in just such cases. What happened to me is called Sudden Arrhythmia Death (SAD), but in my case is called Aborted Sudden Arrhythmia Death, which somehow sounds lovely to me. One five percent of people are fortunate enough to have their SAD become their ASAD, and only one or two percent avoid serious damage (which I claim not to have, though I admit there's some epistemological circularity in believing me). Apparently it is almost unheard of for a spouse to save a spouse. Even when they know CPR they tend to panic and cannot define much less solve the problem. I also benefited from the almost immediate help of others, including a neighbor who is a graduate of my school's nursing program and another nursing student just about to graduate, all of whom were able to see into me, define the problem quickly and precisely, and then solve it. For many years I have appreciated having nursing students in my ethics classes. They always have seemed to me to be excellent models of combining the science and skill of seeing through and into people with the vocational call of seeing people through. But now I have a new reason to want them in my classes. What if my newly implanted defibrillator kicked off in a philosophy seminar? I can just imagine the dialogue between philosophy majors: "To be or not to be; that is the question." "And who knows what the answer is?" "Isn't the human condition a fascinating mystery?" Such questions are deep, which is why I love teaching philosophy students. But I also thank God for those who have the training to see and define the problem and the skill and calling to solve it.

Obviously this business with my heart caught my attention. I have a cartoon of a man in his office and the figure of death appears: the grim reaper – the skeleton in the black robe with his scythe and all. The man says, "Thank Goodness you're here; I can't get a thing done without a deadline." For years I taught a course on "Death and the Meaning of Life," so I am well acquainted with theories about how our awareness of our own mortality gives an edge to the human way of existing. I have never thought it was a good idea to follow the surprisingly common advice to live each day as if it were your last. I don't even know how one could do that day after day, apart from the joke about not buying your bananas green. However, my experience with my heart really brought home to me the wisdom of living each day as if it *might* be your last. This allows you to savor each day – and its activities and relationships – as the gifts they are, and also engage in

long-range planning. Yes, dear reader, this conceivably could be your last day on God's good earth, so rejoice and be glad in it; but do not neglect your 401k.

The upshot is that the certainty and uncertainties flowing from our mortality and, more importantly, from our existential imbedding of it in our living, are some of the most important features of our existence that envelop us in mystery and not just problems. In fact, knowing that about one another is one of the most important ways we see depth in each other. And it is also one of the most important motivations for seeing one another through.

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