The Place of Generosity... and an Open Heart in Your Academic Journey

How differences change what you will know
By Wade C. Rowatt

Recognize and Respect Diversity

Baylor is a diverse community of students, faculty, staff, administration, alumni, friends, and visitors. As you walk across campus or experience class this semester, look more closely for evidence of diversity. If you look closely, you’ll see people who vary with regard to age, gender, ethnicity, body size, and many other personal characteristics. Some aspects of an individual’s diversity may be less detectable, such as social class, learning ability, political leanings and so forth.

There’s a lot more to you and others beneath the surface of our skin. Strive to get to know your inner self and others, regardless of external characteristics. To learn more about inner qualities, you’ll have to hang out together, listen to what others have to say, and observe behavior across situations. If you listen carefully, you may hear people profess views that are different from your own. Our natural inclination may be to shy away from views dissimilar from our own. When you identify a difference or unfamiliar idea, say, “tell me more about that.” In an on-going conversation, ask people their position on a current issue (e.g., immigration, global warming, the economy, poverty) and you may discover common grounds or differences of opinion. You can learn a lot about people by spending time with them and listening to their stories. You might even learn that, beneath the surface, our differences are much less significant than what we have in common.

A Place of Generosity....

Generosity, kindness, care, and compassion orient us toward others. Generosity can be extended to others conditionally or unconditionally (i.e., no strings attached). According to many scholars, the practice of unconditional love (*agape* in Greek) is the foundation of moral and spiritual life in all the major world religions and in most successful groups. Generosity is a character strength. People with this strength endorse statements like,

- Others are just as important as I am.
- All human beings are of equal worth.
- Giving is more important than receiving.
- I am not the center of the universe, but part of a common humanity.
- It is important to help everyone, not just family and friends.
Examples of Generosity: Clues from neuroscience, the New Testament, and our school newspaper

We may find it easy to be generous and hospitable to our close friends and family, the rich, or others in positions of advantage. Radical generosity stretches us to extend hospitality to the poor, less fortunate, those in historically disadvantaged social groups, and others with whom we may disagree or be different. This kind of generosity is more challenging, perhaps because it is less natural or instinctive.

It's fairly easy to love neighbors who are similar and well-behaved, but what about neighbors who are dissimilar or rude? How do we react when we see a homeless person, or someone beaten-up and left-for-dead, or someone who violates our comfort zone? For some clues, I turned to a psychology-neuroscience text, the New Testament, and the Baylor Lariat.

From the textbook I learned that when we first see a new person who is different from us, areas of the brain implicated in the experience of fear become active. Using this reflexive neural system, in part, we quickly assess whether a person is safe or a threat. Even lizards and sheep have these old brain structures that operate automatically (essentially without awareness or conscious control). Unlike lizards, humans also have a reflective neural system that allows us to control what we’re thinking and doing. It takes effort to stop, think, plan, and exercise self-control. We can decide. We can decide what to eat or not eat, what to wear, and whether to respond with or without prejudice, even when our reflexive neural system sounds an alarm.

According to the New Testament, another way to practice generosity and hospitality is to love your neighbor. “And who is your neighbor?” When a lawyer asked Jesus this question, Jesus replied by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29-37). In this parable a priest and Levite (a lay associate of the priest) pass by a man stripped, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. A Samaritan (a foreigner not expected to help) extended compassion and mercy to the victim. At the end of the story Jesus said to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” The reflexive brain system might lead us to behave as the priest or Levite. That’s our instinct but it’s also possible that we might rise above our primitive instinctive impulses, exercise self-control, and choose to respond with generosity.

The university newspaper documented another example of what I interpret to be fairly radical generosity and kindness. A few years ago visitors in a group named Soulforce came to Baylor’s campus. According to this organization’s website, their vision is to “seek freedom from religious and political oppression for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning people.” Soulforce’s vision and Baylor’s current policies about sexual conduct could not be more different. However, according to an editorial available on
the *Lariat’s* website (April 9, 2010), Claire Taylor wrote, “Baylor made a positive statement by allowing Soulforce on campus and welcoming them under the doctrine of Christian love.” Taylor also wrote that, “Some members even attended Dr Pepper hour, where they were able to engage in dialogue with a Baylor administrator about equal rights issues. This is not something you see every day at Baylor and proved to be a positive message on campus. It showed that even though the university and many on campus may not agree with the message Soulforce brought, as Christians and academics, we are able to accept those with different beliefs.”

Individual differences are reality. I challenge each of us to work together to make Baylor a place of generosity—a place where people who hold different views than you or me, or the majority of us may hold, can come, be heard, be respected, and be affirmed about who they are at this time and place in their life. At the end of the day, we may still disagree, but by responding with generosity and openness, we plant a metaphorical seed that may germinate and grow in others some day. We also allow others to share ideas with us – ideas that may help us grow, learn, mature, and perhaps reach our fullest potential some day.

**Questions for Consideration:**

1. In what ways is Baylor diverse? In what ways could Baylor be more diverse?
2. Describe a time when someone else was generous or hospitable to you? How did that affect you? How did that change your view of the person who was compassionate to you?
3. In what ways is openness important for a successful academic journey?
4. In what ways could you be more open to the diversity of others or ideas?

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