The Practice of Service and its Relevance to the Academic Life

By Jon Singletary

The best education cannot be merely utilitarian. It cannot only be for the sake of self-promotion or to “get ahead” or to become “successful.” For students to be educated they must become passionate about learning itself and convicted that their preparation helps them to participate in the world in meaningful and redemptive ways. It cannot simply be about the student.

You have enrolled in a university with a distinctive mission that integrates academic excellence and Christian commitment within a caring community.

My friend, Gordon Cosby, has been talking about “the journey inward, the journey outward” for 75 years. This phrase offers a framework for his view that all people are called to serve, if we will only practice listening to God and practice serving others in the way God asks of us. Gordon began preaching when he was 15 years old. He recently celebrated his 90th birthday.

Gordon and his wife, Mary Cosby, founded the Church of the Saviour in a low-income neighborhood of Washington, D.C. in 1946, and today they continue to live out the call that first led to the creation of this church. Gordon remains as clear today as he was back then that each one of us has a vocation, an outward journey, and that it is deeply tied to our journey inward.

The journey inward is the process of knowing who we are, who we really are, and who we are intended to become. We think so much about what we do, what our major is, or how impressive our high school experience has been, about how much credence people give to what we have done. But Gordon puts it another way: “Do we, in this period of time, cling to being or doing? We don’t think as much about who we are, and that is a much more basic, and more interesting, question than what we do.”

The inward journey is to help us work with who we are. We all have different ways of trying to understand ourselves, but we have to work at it. The academic life and the spiritual life work together in many ways contributing to our inner journey. College life is about learning, including learning who we are. Gordon shared with some of our students when we were together: “How do we reflect on what we are learning about ourselves? Are we able to pause, to sit and to listen for how our learning shapes who we are?”

In light of this inward journey, I am writing to talk about the practice of service as an expression of the outward journey. Too often “service” is just something that we do. It is a list of our leadership responsibilities or our volunteer activities. For some, service includes
those activities in the community that we feel we have to do. Instead of this perfunctory view of service, Gordon says that we all have an outward journey that grows from the inward journey. And I agree. Gordon told us, “Once you get a hold of what you are intended to be, you ask: What is the appropriate doing for that being? Who are you intended to be in this period of life and what are you to do next? What I am intended to be and do is different now and has been different at every stage of life. We know that the inward work always issues an active outward work...when Jesus would separate himself from the others, he was keeping the connection with the Ultimate. Out of that he knew what he was to do. And at times, even Jesus resisted it.” Jesus had to decide, even until the end, what was the outward work God was calling him to do. Each of us has to decide these things, as well.

And that is the nature of the practice of service. As was the case for Jesus, this practice can be challenging. Acts of service sometimes push us beyond our comfort zones. They can teach us new life lessons. They foster new relationships. Service to others teaches us care and compassion, helps us learn grace and mercy, provides a way for us to seek peace and justice in our lives and the lives of others we meet on the journey.

Dom Hélder Câmara, the Catholic Archbishop in northeastern part of Brazil during the 1970s, discerned that in serving others he was to take a stand with others. Câmara said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.” His life of service to people living in poverty led him to work for their human rights. Throughout his ministry, critics continually ridiculed when he questioned the violence of war in Vietnam and its effects on people who are poor. His passionate life of service had its challenges and his outward journey definitely required him to maintain his journey inward.

From Archbishop Câmara and others’ stories, as well as my own experience, I have learned that service provides us with opportunities for further reflection. The journey outward gives us a reason to continue on the inward journey. This is not a once-and-for-all kind of process; this is not a one-way journey. We journey inward and we journey outward, and over and over, and often at the same time. We cannot complete the journey inward before living out what we have learned. On the other hand, as we live the outward journey in service with others, we never cease looking inward.

During my last year of college, I had begun to learn about the inward journey and what it meant to listen for who I was and where God might be calling me. In trying to live this journey outward, I had just begun a youth ministry internship in a local church. John, the Youth Minister, suggested I also spend some time with Nona, the Minister of Missions. I knew I was already on a journey of service, of service to the youth in this church. The call to serve youth was my mission and, naïve as I was about how to understand the mission of God, I really didn’t feel that any further work in missions was for me. I knew working with the youth in this church seemed like the right next step and that what I was doing was enough. Eventually, though, I decided to join Nona for a day. She took me to meet several families who had been struggling to make ends meet; she asked how their teenagers fit into the ministry to youth at this church. The more I struggled with her questions about youth
and mission, the more I wrestled with how to understand my calling. Nona suggested I read some of the classics in Christian spirituality; I had no idea what she was talking about. After a few more visits with her and reading a few of the books she loaned to me, I had not only begun to learn anew the value of serving others but I met a role model who could explain how the journeys inward and outward in our lives are always connected. In the months to come, I not only tried to balance the practices of spiritual formation and service to some of the new neighbors I had met, but I also felt that this was leading to an even more clear sense of calling.

My hope is that you have a great experience while at Baylor. You will certainly have a great time meeting new friends and coming into your own. I hope you enjoy your time reading and studying just as much. You will learn new things about the world and about yourself. I hope that you are attentive to this inner journey of learning and that you are able to listen to God as a part of it. I hope you find a community that is enriching and that prepares you for your journey. And, in all of this, my hope is also that you hear God calling you into practices of service. Engage your community; meet neighbors around the Baylor campus, and give of yourself to others on life’s journey. May the practice of service be as fulfilling as other experiences you have at Baylor and may it be rooted in who God has made you to be. And may your inner journey and outward journey be mutually fulfilling.

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