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Teaching In Plague-Time

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On October 22, 1939, six weeks after World War II had broken out, C. S. Lewis preached to a large crowd of Oxford University students, who were wondering what the point of the academic life might be at that time of international emergency. His address was titled, "Learning in War-Time." My meditation this afternoon will be much shorter than Lewis's great sermon, and to some extent dependent on its content. But in view of my present audience and the current world situation, I'm flipping the focus and the title. I'm calling this, "Teaching in Plague-Time."

Speaking *as* a teacher, I've been haunted since the coronavirus pandemic broke out by two rather strong fears. Maybe you have, too. I want to say a few words about each of these fears and to encourage us to face and conquer them.

My first fear is that I won't be able to teach effectively this quarter given that I'll be using technologies I haven't yet mastered. I've been feverishly revising my PowerPoints, glumly redesigning my Canvas sites, and fiercely cursing the intricacies of Zoom and Panopto. Countless times I've asked myself, "How can I possibly teach under these restrictive conditions? How will I ever figure out these complicated programs?" As a teacher, I've always been the "sage on the stage," not the "guide by the side," but these days I feel more like the

“rube on the tube.” I feel silly wearing headphones. I fumble with the Zoom controls. I look at the screen instead of the camera and realize I’m watching myself looking away from myself.

Understandable as this fear of pedagogical failure may be, it springs from a deeper source than shame for my technological ineptitude. It springs from the subconscious assumption that my professorial persona is more important than the intrinsic value of the subject matter I am called to teach, more important than the spiritual and intellectual needs of my students. This is more than wrong. It’s sinful. My performance anxiety exposes the vanity that lurks beneath my ineptitude. My conscious fears may subside as my competence improves in coming weeks. But I must repent of my need for my students’ admiration. If you’re in the same boat, maybe these emergency measures will give you, too, an opportunity for spiritual healing.

My second fear is that the material I will be teaching this quarter will seem wholly irrelevant to my students given that it seems so far removed from the pressing needs of our time. What have the decrees of the Sixth Ecumenical Council to do with the shortage of ventilators and facemasks? Am I doing no more than offering them a brief diversion from the daily news, or feeding their hope that things will soon be back to normal, or contributing my mite to the completion of a credential they need before venturing into the “real world”?

This second fear springs not from my vanity, but from my tendency to forget what Christian higher education is for. Here Lewis’s sermon is very helpful. His audience worried that it was unethical to pursue their studies while Hitler was gobbling up Europe. They assumed that the *world* situation had changed the *academic* situation. Here’s what Lewis told them: “The war creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If [people] had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun. We are mistaken when we compare war with ‘normal life.’ Life has never been normal.”[1]

Was Lewis minimizing or trivializing the dangers and disruptions of the political situation of his day? No. He was remarking on the ontology of human life as such. True, as Heraclitus taught us, “All things are always changing.”[2] The only constant is flux. And at the surface level, a great many things *were* changing in 1939, very suddenly and very alarmingly—just as they are today. But if we view human life through the lens of the Christian gospel, this pandemic “creates no absolutely new situation” for us, any more than war did for Lewis and his students. “It simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it.”

Yet the pandemic *does* create a fresh opportunity for us to see the real point of what we’ve been doing all along. It is to engage in, and to invite our students to engage in, “the search for knowledge and beauty.” This search is not an irrelevancy or a distraction. It is an end in itself, an intrinsic good. To be sure, current events provide riveting illustrations of timeless principles and new opportunities for the practical application of those principles. We rightly want our teaching to be “relevant” in this time of worldwide pestilence. Yet there is nothing more

irrelevant than relevance, if “relevance” is nothing more than a kneejerk reaction to the immediate and the ephemeral.

P. T. Forsyth put it this way: “**If within us, we find nothing** over **us**, we succumb to what is around **us**.”[3] As Christian *educators*, we must take account of what is changing “around” us, lest we fail to respond wisely and creatively. But as *Christian* educators, we must not forget what is “above” us—the eternally Good, the abidingly True, and the enduringly Beautiful. The quest for the three great transcendentals is the ultimate aim of all higher learning, as mediated through the particularities of our various disciplines. They are the guises in which God becomes manifest “within us,” and lifts us from our sins and sufferings. And it is our task and privilege to put our students (and ourselves) into daily contact with them. Thus, it is precisely by doing our workaday job as scholars and teachers, as well as we can, that we bring steadiness, sobriety, wisdom, patience, and courage into the grim urgencies of the hour.

[1] C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 47-63.

[2] Plato, *Cratylus* 402A.

[3] Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 47.

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