

Restless Delight: Educating for Shalom

Inaugural Address of J. Harry Fernhout, Ph.D.

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Mr. Chairman, esteemed predecessors, academic guests and governmental delegates, family, faculty, staff, students, and all friends of The King's University College.

The King's University College is out to change the world!

I'll just let that hang in the air a moment, while you decide if I'm a visionary, a dreamer, or merely deluded.

Is it arrogant to claim that this institution, small as it is, is out to change the world? Well, the Presidential Profile developed by the Search Committee stated that you wanted a president "with a clear sense of The King's mission as a transformational, Christian, post-secondary learning institution in the Reformed tradition." And the Institutional Profile claimed that The King's is a place of robust faith which "emphasizes the highest intellectual and personal achievement, moral discernment reflecting Christian values, and a transforming commitment to social justice" (p.3). Robust. Transformational. Justice. Perhaps you can understand how I got the impression that this is a place with ambition, with a passion to contribute to positive change in the world.

Then again, I suppose it's not unusual for universities to claim that they are out to change the world. I recall that all over the campus of the University of Toronto, banners on the lampposts proclaim, "Great minds for a great future." Our society invests heavily in higher education out of the conviction that colleges and universities make a contribution to the betterment of life. If those of us who are directly involved in higher education didn't think that our teaching, research and community service contributes to change for the better, we'd be in the wrong business.

The question, then, is not whether The King's University College is out to change the world, but *how* it hopes to contribute to the project it shares with all of higher education. The answer, I suggest, lies in my subtitle: The King's can and will make its contribution by "Educating for Shalom."

The phrase "Educating for Shalom" is borrowed from the title of Nicholas Wolterstorff's recent book on Christian higher education. Wolterstorff highlights the greatest strengths and wrestles with the greatest vulnerabilities of higher education in the Reformed tradition, the tradition which gave birth to The King's.

This tradition typically expresses the goals of higher education in comprehensive terms: the aim is to equip students to live committed lives and to engage their world as followers of Christ. To that end, institutions in this tradition strive to weave the Christian faith deep into the fabric of their educational programs. Long before the phrase "the integration of faith and learning" became fashionable in Christian higher education, colleges in the Reformed tradition saw it as their mission to develop a Christian mind-set in their students; to equip them with tools needed to make discerning, faith-shaped life choices and contributions to society.

While he has no problem with these broad goals, Wolterstorff expresses strong reservations about the means traditionally used to achieve them. Historically, Reformed educators have emphasized the importance of developing and teaching a Christian perspective in the various subjects and disciplines of the college curriculum: a Christian approach to Economics, to Psychology, and you name it. All these efforts are geared to equipping students with a Christian mind, enabling them to think Christianly about their chosen fields. If the job of a university college is understood to be teaching students how to think, then a Christian university college surely should teach them to think Christianly.

Wolterstorff identifies three significant problems with or limitations of this approach. The first is the faulty assumption that a Christian way of *thinking* about the world will just naturally express itself in a Christian way of *being* in the world. In their adult lives students taught in this way will likely *talk* the Christian mind and *live* the mind of the world. Why? Because living a Christ-like life depends on more than thinking; it also depends on things like modelling, discipline, or spiritual formation.

A second problem is that an emphasis on developing a Christian mind one-sidedly accentuates the positive aspects of our human task of unfolding creation's potential and contributing to the development of culture. "The wounds of the world scarcely enter our curriculum," says Wolterstorff. But we live in a broken world, and Christian higher education must also be a response to the cries and tears of human suffering.

Thirdly, Wolterstorff worries that the emphasis on rigorous Christian thinking obscures a "sense of delight and gratitude....: delight in God's creation, delight in humanity's works of art, and grateful worship of God." (1984:19). And surely a sense of awe, wonder and delight should be characteristic of Christian university college graduates.

Wolterstorff's assessment is that these shortcomings point to a need for a "more comprehensive, a more holistic model" of Christian higher education, a model better equipped to facilitate the overarching goal of educating effective followers of Christ in our place and time. To that end, he proposes a Shalom Community Model, "a model that incorporates the arts, the sciences, the professions, and yes, the worship and piety of humanity, along with humanity's wounds, and brings them together into one coherent whole." (2004:24). On this model, 'educating for shalom' is what a Christian university college, *our* university college, is all about.

What is shalom? Shalom is the Hebrew word we translate as 'peace,' but everyone agrees that 'peace' captures not even half of what 'shalom' is all about. Shalom is what this morning's Scripture reading from Isaiah 65 describes: a time and place when a city is a delight and its people a joy, where nobody dies before their time, where people build affordable homes and get to live in them, where there is no poverty, homelessness, no cancer, and where the wolf and the lamb will feed together. This is a vision of every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and wellbeing of all. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, shalom is the dream of God that resists all human tendencies to division, hostility, fear, exploitation and misery.

But as Nicholas Wolterstorff asserts, shalom is more than a vision; it is also an ethical and religious command in a world filled with pain, suffering and woundedness. It is a call to respond to the pangs of the hungry, the despair of the jobless and the refugee, the squalor of the ghettos, the pollution of the

skies, the pain of the sick and the hopelessness of the imprisoned. Shalom is a command to do what we can to contribute to the healing of our communities, our society, our world. Why? Because “we see the tears of God behind the wounds of the world.” (2004:xiii)

The Christian story of faith, which The King’s University College claims as its own, weaves together these two sides – shalom as vision and shalom as command – in marvellous fashion. It is a story in whose opening chapter God exults over the world: “Wow, this is *very* good!” Shalom reigns. It is a story in which, next, we meet God in tears over shalom lost: “O my people, how often would I have gathered you like a hen gathers her chicks, and you would not...” Next we encounter a God who took the suffering and sin of that same world on himself in the life, death and new life of Jesus Christ. And out of that darkest moment of world history came a promise that in Christ God will make all things new, so that God can proclaim once more, “This is *very, very* good!” The central thread of the story, we can say without exaggeration, is God’s passion for *shalom*. That’s why the ‘good news’ is called the ‘gospel of peace’. And that’s why this morning’s New Testament reading, from which the motto on our college seal is taken, says, “Let peace rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace -- shalom.” Christians, says St. Paul, are agents of reconciliation, or, in the words of Perry Yoder, “shalom makers” who “strive for total reconciliation – among people, putting an end to want, oppression and deception, and between people and God, so that all can live in the newness of life that is the vision of shalom.” (p.21).

Our institutional calling, as a shalom community, is to play our part in that unfolding, world-changing story of shalom a-coming. Our calling is to participate in some way, great or small, in enacting this story through teaching, research and community service. Our particular calling is to equip a new generation for participation in this drama, readying them to be responsible contributors to society, shaping life in the direction of the healing and shalom which our story promises. My dream for The King's University College is to be and to become more fully an institution driven by a passion for embodying something of this vision in our scholarship and teaching, our administering and cleaning, our fundraising and socializing, our worship and prayer. My dream is of an academic community characterized by healthy relationships of all kinds, by a joyful spirit, by care and concern for every member of the learning community, but also and especially care and concern about the absence of shalom wherever it exists in our personal lives, in this city, or wherever in God’s creation.

What would an academic institution shaped by the vision and call of shalom look like? That's a complex question with many facets. We could and should look at the programs we offer: how does a shalom vision help us decide which programs or majors to offer and which to leave out? Do our choices equip students to be agents of reconciliation in our time? We could look at how we teach: is it professor-centred, or does it enable students to flourish and grow into competent adulthood? We could consider whether our student life programs are sufficiently valued. We could ask whether our relationships with the City of Edmonton or our support community are flourishing. We could look at fundraising – who do we ask, for what, and why? What story do our institutional priorities tell? Certainly there will be opportunity to consider all of these angles in the months and years to come and part of my responsibility as president will be to keep them on the agenda.

This morning, I will limit myself to two broad characteristics of an academic community oriented to shalom: restless delight.

Delight in learning is that side of shalom which reflects and celebrates God's own assessment of this creation: "This is *good*." The King's University College should be a place where delight is palpable when you walk through the door; the place should vibrate with a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of love for the world entrusted to us. Here it should be obvious that professors love their fields of study because they provide points of access to creation's inexhaustible mysteries and resources for learning. The King's should be a place where both experiments in the chemistry lab and dramatic readings in English class create excitement because both give us glimpses of the Creator's imagination. Here we should find joy in a research project that contributes to environmental wellbeing somewhere in Africa. Here we should delight in healthy relationships, including between administrators and academics. And in our delight, we will gather for worship in awe and wonder, giving thanks for the sheer joy of learning.

I see such delight each day at The King's. I see it in Kobie Kloppers, Professor of Music, whose impeccable gentlemanly dress and manner can't hide the gleam of pure pleasure in his eye as his students master the pipes and stops of our Letourneau organ. I see delight when Brian Martin, Professor of Physics and Astronomy, pulls me into his lab, hands me a pair of those funny-looking 3-D glasses,

and uses new visualization technology which he and colleagues at the University of Alberta have developed to take me on a virtual tour of our solar system, followed a by 3-D look at a string of DNA. I read delight between the lines of the emails our Athletics Director, Claire Paterson sends about the exploits of our sports teams, win or lose.

The King's should stand out as a place of such delight, celebrating shalom, the wonder and wellbeing of the cosmos wherever we can find it. This is an essential part of our Christian witness in the wide world of higher education. May we never become complacent about the delight of learning.

But delight at The King's should walk hand-in-hand with restlessness. Not a restlessness born of despair, but a holy dissatisfaction with what we know and where we are today. Part of that restlessness will simply be an aspect of the delight of knowing that there is always more to learn. Part will be based on our recognition that we are not yet what we can and should be as an institution. But at bottom our restlessness must come from the ethical call inherent in the biblical vision of shalom, a vision that does not allow us to rest easy with pain, suffering and injustice in the world, particularly when these result from either violent or polite human acts of greed and oppression.

The King's University College *is* a place of restlessness, a restlessness personified in our Campus Minister, Roy Berkenbosch, who will not rest until in our campus life, in the words of Psalm 85, "love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other." This is a place of restlessness when students serve dinner to the homeless at The Mustard Seed Street Church, and when we develop plans for a Micah Centre for social justice on our campus. This is also a place of restlessness when Associate Academic Vice President Bob Bruinsma and Professor of Sociology Randolph Haluza-DeLay each ask us to re-imagine what really counts as faculty research – Bob by suggesting that a commitment to excellence in teaching should count, and Randy by arguing the merits of community-based research which seeks concrete solutions (shalom solutions) to local community issues.

A holy restlessness should characterize this place, and I say to our college constituency that if we notice its absence, if we at The King's no longer challenge the status quo, including yours, if we become complacent or smug – well, you know where to find me.

There's another important reason why I believe this vision of 'educating for shalom' fits The King's University College. Because it was founded primarily by people who shared a particular worldview, this institution speaks the language of higher education with a Reformed accent. But The King's has consistently welcomed into its faculty, staff, and especially its student body, persons from a wide variety of Christian traditions. This diversity was delightfully illustrated at our recent faculty retreat when Business professor Gordon Preston recited his spiritual and intellectual journey: Gord grew up as a member of the United Church of Canada, left it and the faith as a teenager, returned to faith via the Mennonite Brethren; was nurtured by a Roman Catholic community; and wrote a thesis at an evangelical graduate school on Russian Orthodox women's spirituality. He has taught at a Mennonite, a Lutheran and now a Reformed university and although an Anglican for many years, he now is a member of a Lutheran church. You get the point. We have a lot of diversity at The King's. The challenge then is to maintain a strong sense of institutional unity, to incorporate the many Christian accents of our faculty and students into an institution that continues to speak with a Reformed brogue.

In the interview process I addressed this challenge by calling for an open-house spirit. If The King's were an in-house institution, Reformed folks dominate conversation with their own incomprehensible dialect, speaking of sphere sovereignty and common grace, of anticipations and retroceptions. People like Gord Preston would remain uncomfortable, on the periphery. What we need, I suggested, is an open-house. It may have the characteristics and ambience of a particular tradition, but the welcome mat is out, the doors are open, and everyone can make a contribution to the lively dialogue and debate going on inside.

Since Hilda and I moved to Edmonton, though, I've come to imagine The King's as a renovated house, like the home we purchased in Bonnie Doon. Our home began its life as a two-bedroom bungalow. The foundations were deep and the structure solid, but the rooms were cramped and the windows didn't let much light in. The renovation changed all that. A two-storey addition doubled the size. The addition isn't perfectly seamless; you can see a little bump in the floor where the old and new are joined. The foundations of the addition aren't as deep. But you should see the windows! Light from the addition floods the whole house and opens it to the world around. And the upstairs skylight opens the house to heaven! In many ways, it's still the same house, with coved ceilings and arched doorways. But it's also a new house, bigger and brighter with a lot more room for people to circulate.

For The King's University College, it's not good enough just to be a solid little house in the Reformed tradition, not even an open house, if that means that the house is not subject to change. We need to undertake the adventure of renovation! A home renovation project, as anyone who has hung wallpaper knows, is the ultimate test of a marriage, and there's no reason to think institutional renovation is any different. But a good renovation needs a plan that maintains the integrity of the old structure while adding the benefits of the new. The plan for the ongoing renovation of this University College, I'm suggesting, is the vision of a shalom community. This is not a Reformed idea, not a Lutheran idea, nor a Catholic idea; it is a biblical vision, and as such embraces within its cosmic scope professors, students and supporters from all backgrounds and traditions – anyone who wants to be part of a community of shalom makers.

So... The King's University College is out to change the world! Is this an arrogant claim? It would be, were it not for the One whom we follow, and whose name is emblazoned on this building. His story tells of changing the world through humility, love for others, suffering with and for those in need of grace, and ultimately self-sacrifice. His name is Prince of Peace -- Shalom. It is in his spirit and as his possession that The King's University College seeks to change the world.

My commitment to you today is to do what I can, within the capacities God has entrusted to me, to make this a community of shalom for our King. Students, I'll work hard to provide a place for you to develop your talents and to equip you to pick up the threads of God's shalom story, carrying it forward in your generation through your life and witness. Faculty, I'll do my best to provide a place where both your restlessness and delight can flourish. All staff, I'll work for a place where your particular talents are affirmed, as members of one body. Supporters, I'll give myself to your ongoing vision for an academic community that is an effective witness to the Lord of all learning, and that serves you and our society with challenging programs and ideas. Members of the wider academic community, people of Edmonton, Alberta, and beyond, I promise that The King's will be a place that contributes to the well-being of our communities, a place that lives by the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who said, "Seek the shalom of the city where I have set you. Pray to the Lord for it, for in its shalom you will find your shalom."