

Reflections of a Lasallian Educator: A Call to Action

By

Monica D. Fitzgerald, Assistant Professor
Saint Mary's College of California

"Some men see things as they are and ask why; I dream of things that never were and say *why not*." While this quotation is actually from a George Bernard Shaw play, it was made more famous by Robert F. Kennedy, and for most of my life, this idea of being an agent of social change directed by life's path.¹ From a young age, I wanted to change the world. I was raised in a working-class family and my parents were not particularly politically engaged, but they had a strong core belief in the dignity of all people. My mother grew up in Kentucky during desegregation, and told stories of the lasting damage hatred and racism had on her community. She simply could not tolerate any form of discrimination against another human being. That deep sense of respect for all people resonated with me to fight for a just world. I was still in middle school when Edward Kennedy ended his speech at the Democratic Convention in 1980 with the promise, "The hope still lives, the cause endures, and the dream shall never die." While he was reminding America of the legacy of his fallen brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr., for me, it was a call to action. In high school, I encouraged classmates to join political campaigns, brought attention to the fight against apartheid, and organized a not-so-successful "No Nukes" rally at the local college (enthusiastically attended by one other person). Eventually, I became an historian because I believe that through understanding our past we can change our future. I came to view education as the most critical vehicle for social change. When I joined the faculty Saint Mary's College of California, I discovered how much my principles and teaching pedagogy aligned with Lasallian traditions and core principles. Personally and professionally, I have tried to live a life that celebrates diversity, encourages inclusivity, and strives to leave the world a better place. At Saint Mary's, I have found a place that unifies my personal principles and my academic goals; I have found a home, and through Saint Mary's I have truly grown and developed into a Lasallian educator. My teaching pedagogy, community engagement work, and relationships with students are all grounded in a Lasallian approach to teaching and learning.

Being a teacher is a vocation for me; and while my teaching philosophy has always been about galvanizing change, being part of a Lasallian community has provided me a history, language and pedagogy that has helped me fully express and live out my calling. Attending the International Association of Lasallian Universities Institute in 2012, I was stirred by the welcoming address of Superior General Brother Alvaro. When he described passionately the Lasallian mission to raise awareness of social justice issues around the globe, he explained, "Our work cannot appear neutral...We have to take a stand...The important mission of the universities is to keep hope alive." I did not become a teacher to merely deliver content, but to inspire hope. At Saint Mary's, I have been able to teach courses that examine inequities of race, class and gender. By adapting Lasallian pedagogy of student-centered learning and engagement with the world, I have been able to make these issues more than an academic exercise, but have sent students into the community to experience these problems first hand. For students to reflect and integrate their experiential learning with their texts, I use a model developed by our college's Catholic Institute for Lasallian Social Action (CILSA). The framework "What, So What, Now What," asks students to deconstruct the problem, explain its significance, and suggest solutions. Thus, they are regularly engaged in discussions about their responsibility to a just world. Students can often become disillusioned focusing on all of the problems of the world, but using this framework, they

¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, Bentano Publishers, 1921. Robert Kennedy quoted it, and Edward Kennedy memorialized it and further paraphrased it at the funeral of Robert Kennedy in 1968.

remain hopeful that we can create change in the world. It is through these exercises that students make some of their first connections about what it means to be Lasallian.

Working at a mission-based school, I have the freedom to not be neutral, but to create classes that focus on social justice and serve as a call to action for my students to create a more just world. A perfect example of this Lasallian approach to education is a field trip my students take to Glide Memorial Church, which serves a very poor community in the Tenderloin of San Francisco, California. Led by activist minister Cecil Williams since 1963, this congregation describes its mission as, “A radically inclusive, just and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization.”² The similarities between Cecil Williams and John Baptist DeLaSalle are palpable, yet my students initially cannot make that connection. Before their visit, they express trepidations – Glide is in an area of high crime, drugs, and prostitution; they have never been around such poverty, homelessness, or despair. On the Sunday in the fall semester when we make this sojourn, the students first attend Glide’s mass. With its jazz band, multiethnic choir and its liberation theology, students are at first shocked, as it appears unlike any church service they had ever attended. Then they begin to listen, and hear the words “concern for the poor”, “social justice”, “serving the community”, and “love”. Every year I can count on the moment they turn to me, wide-eyed and smile, “I get it.” They witness Lasallian principles in action – concern for the poor and social justice, respect for all persons, and faith in the presence of God, and begin to realize that being Lasallian is not about a college identity, but a way to lead their lives.

After church, we serve anywhere from 700 to 1,000 lunches; students meet, greet, converse, and help men, women and children of all ages and backgrounds. It is an emotional day for students, to put faces to poverty, to hear personal stories of hardship and loss, and to bear witness to the extreme inequities that exist in our communities. For many students, it is a transformative experience as they reenter the classroom with a new-found call to action. One of my students reflected on the idea of the Lasallian principle of inclusive community through her Glide visit:

It suddenly became more than just great words. Imagining a better, peaceful world became possible to me because of the amazing sight that I witnessed. There were people of all backgrounds and faiths gathered together celebrating life on that Sunday morning. I had never witnessed such a diverse, inclusive community and it literally brought tears to my eyes. I realized that Martin Luther King’s *World House* is indeed possible but it is also a choice. Creating that inclusive community isn’t easy...it does take work.³

Through their experiences, students begin to see their responsibility in addressing poverty and inequality; and they begin to see the connections with John Baptist de la Salle and other change-makers in the world. A student commented on how much she learned from the clients at Glide, that “the truly invisible people have the most cracks and bruises; they have the most stories and are the possessors of the greatest strength of all.” Such experiences deepen their learning.

In addition to the experience at Glide, students engage in service learning, which is a pedagogy that links practice to theory, and students serve at local agencies and reflect on how such work relates to their classroom learning.⁴ While service learning is practiced at secular institutions, it is infused with Lasallian

² <http://www.glide.org/>

³ Martin Luther King Jr.’s “World House,” is the first article students read during the semester they go to Glide. It is from his final book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Beacon Press, 1968.

principles. After her first semester of service learning, one of my students changed her career trajectory to focus on social justice issues in the non-profit sector:

While at Saint Mary's I have been introduced to and have fallen in love with the ideas of social justice and service-learning ... I have learned how to give marginalized groups the dignity and respect they deserve ... I have realized how much I love working behind the scenes to make things happen—researching, organizing, problem solving, impacting large groups of people, caring for the most vulnerable of populations, listening to the silenced and forgotten, living in community with the people whom I serve and making a difference in the lives of a diverse population of people.

Through helping students find their passion to create change, we keep hope alive. Becoming a Lasallian educator has given me the tools and support to foster this type of self-discovery.

Having students develop their own call to action is a central goal in my teaching. In a 2008 lecture Reverend J. Michael Miller gave for the Henning Institute and The Bishop John S. Cummings Institute lecture series entitled, "What Makes a Catholic Higher Education Distinctive," Miller explained, "In our Catholic tradition, learning is aimed at awakening in all students a genuine passion for justice and a desire to be moral and responsible citizens of the world." As Miller described, these are all important aspects of the Catholic education tradition, which he explained is "a study of serious contemporary problems in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, quality of family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability."⁵ This Catholic and Lasallian ethos extends into all of my classes from environmental responsibility and democracy to early American history.

In this Lasallian student-centered approach to teaching and learning, I encourage students to critically examine the issues of the day and their roles as change-makers. Such goals are at the heart of a Lasallian education. In her end of year assessment, a student wrote:

What I have learned through my service learning is that to never judge a book by its cover. My mother has been telling me that for years, ever since I was a young girl, but I never thought of it as a moral obligation until the service at Glide....It was very hard for me to understand the pain and suffering the clients must feel when they are struggling to fulfill a basic human need....The service learning also taught me not to accept things for how they appear. And that if you are outraged or upset about the condition of humanity, you can take small steps to change that particular aspect of the human condition. Being that, if there is something that upsets you on a deep personal level, you can actually change the community around you. I learned this with every facet of my service learning.

Saint Mary's has recently been named as one of the top forty colleges that change lives.⁶ Our Lasallian emphasis on community engagement is being recognized nationally. By teaching at Saint Mary's, I have learned and embraced the pedagogy of service learning, which enables me to link practice to theory, and have students not only study poverty, but serve the poor. In a 2010 Convocation Address at Saint Mary's, Brother Carlos Alvaro explained, "I am convinced that the educator who assumes his vocation

⁴ For more information on service learning, see Susan Benigni Cipolli, *Service Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change*, Roman & Littlefield, 2008; Andrew Furco and Shelly H. Billig, eds., *Service Learning: The Essence of the Pedagogy*, Information Age Publishing, 2001.

⁵ Lecture delivered April 5, 2008.

⁶ Lauren Pope and Hilary Masell Oswald, *Colleges that Change Lives: 40 Colleges that will Change the Way You Think about Colleges*, Penguin Books, 2013.

with integrity and dedication must also do it from the conviction that there is goodness, potential, and the ability to fight for a better world in every young person, in every child, in every adult with whom we share our lives as teachers.” Through their service learning, students are actually actively creating that better world.

In their senior year, students in my program create a portfolio of their college career, and at the core of their experience is the impact of service learning. Service changes their lives, and their future paths. A student described one such experience as she worked in a homeless shelter:

I have been able to make the community better by bettering an individual, who then oftentimes pays it forward. One day near the end of the month, a woman approached me in the front lobby of the dining room at St. Anthony’s and asked if we knew anyone who had a pair of walking shoes that she could have. She explained to me that the shopping cart that carried all of her belongings was stolen and she was left with just the clothes on her body. I went downstairs to the emergency closet to get her a pair of shoes and when I came up with the tennis shoes, a huge smile spread across her face and she it was her birthday and I had just made it so much better....As she was leaving, she gave me the warmest, most tender, enthusiastic, genuine, grateful hug that I have ever had. After this conversation and a number of other interactions with individuals lacking in material or monetary possessions, I started to realize how privileged I am and how much I have grown and journeyed in such impactful personal, interpersonal, communal, spiritual, and mental ways.

Another student worked at a transitional home for mothers and children, and not only helped motivate her clients, but she inspired herself to become a more compassionate teacher:

The most important and valuable experience ...was visiting with the mothers and children living in the house. While talking with the mothers I learned how difficult it was to find job openings, be hired, and keep a job while living in poverty. Working there made me reflect on the reality that some of the children transitioning out of homelessness could be in my future classroom. A big part of helping the women at the house was to make them feel important and make each woman realize their important roles in life such as working to help support themselves and their children.

Through their service work at low-income schools, other students found their own vocations:

I want to live a life committed to service which is why I have decided to pursue a teaching degree....Now that I know what it means to be Lasallian, there is nothing more Lasallian, in my opinion, than becoming a teacher. De la Salle believed in creating access to education to all children regardless of background and cultural factors. He believed that every child can learn. The Lasallian motto is “Enter to Learn, Leave to serve.” Teachers serve the communities they work in, educating children on how to become productive, responsible citizens of the world.

A student who worked at a low-income school in Oakland, reflected:

Just after my first week there, I was helping out a student with a math problem and suddenly the student starts to cry. I asked what was wrong and he just looked up at me and asked if I knew where his dad was and if he was coming back. My heart melted and I froze. It was at that moment that I knew I wanted to be a teacher who could make a change. I know I cannot bring that student’s father back but I do know that I can provide students with the opportunity to have a safe place to go for at least eight hours of the day.

This Lasallian pedagogical approach to student learning has a tremendous butterfly effect. A senior student commented on the idea of service, “If we teach children this lesson, it will resonate within them that they should do good not for themselves, but for the betterment of the world.” We energize our

students to go out and change the world, and they, in turn, inspire others. Many of my students intend to become elementary school teachers, so I feel a special Lasallian connection teaching teachers.

Saint Mary's has nurtured my desires to develop meaningful relationships with my students. In *Meditation 180.3*, John Baptist de la Salle writes, "You can perform miracles by touching the hearts of those entrusted to your care." Reaching students personally, spiritually and academically are paramount to my goals as a teacher. I have been able to adopt de la Salle's methods in my own classroom by empowering students to take responsibility for helping one another in small group work, leading discussions, and creating a class culture in which we are all equal and respected. De la Salle called us to be advocates for our students. I consider it sacred. A true education is not about filling their heads with facts, but about enabling them to fill their own hearts and minds, to find their zeal. We cannot do that if we do not build relationships with our students. I have seen my students grow in confidence and stand up for themselves and what they believe is right. This type of intensive work can only be fostered in an institution that seeks to address the needs of the whole person.

When students are mentored and supported, they feel empowered to take action. I am especially proud of a group of my students who took what they learned in our senior capstone class about power and privilege and created a campus wide workshop, "Yes I Can: Exploring the Label of (Dis)ability." They designed activities based on their intellectual questions about difference and privilege, and called attention to the struggles differently abled people have on our own campus and the wider world. This kind of action-based learning is central to Lasallian pedagogy.

At the end of my first year at Saint Mary's, I sat in the pew in my regalia at my first Convocation as Brother Carlos Alvaro delivered his address and declared that "being a teacher is an act of revolution." Chills ran through me, as I looked around the breath-taking chapel, and realized, yes, I am Lasallian. Since that first year, I have immersed myself more and more in Lasallian history and pedagogy so that I can keep hope alive. For Lasallian educators, hope is more than an idea, it is a call to action.