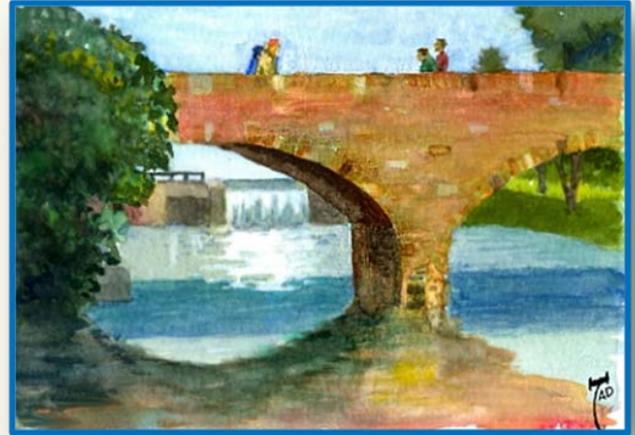


Boundary Crossers

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Students of Siena Heights moving toward graduation do well to consider what tradition the University hopes they will carry forward.

A tradition is an inherited vision about life for certain purposes. It passes on both a world view and an imperative. That is, it says something about what the world is really like and how those who inherit the tradition need to act. Yet each generation along the chain of a tradition faces unique historical circumstances. So today, our inherited worldviews take on new dimensions and their imperatives take on a special focus.



Students, faculty, and staff have a variety of views on what the SHU tradition may be, but I would like to share my own view for your consideration. I'll first state them baldly here and then explain what I mean.

What does the Siena Heights tradition say the world is like today?

We are shaped by our history and our freedom.

The world is laced with boundaries of animosity.

What imperative does this leave with us?

In the tradition of Jesus the Nazarene, cross boundaries.

Think critically.

Shaped by History and Freedom

Historicity

Of the many factors that make us the persons we are, we can boil them down to two. The first is our historicity. As human, we share a common a nature; we are sometimes referred to as *rational animals*. But that doesn't explain what is unique about each of us. What makes you *you* and me *me* is our historicity. Almost everything we know and wonder about, practically everything we cherish or abhor, as well as all our languages, our buildings, our roads, our economies, our technologies, our legal systems, our religions, and our educational systems are inheritances, coming down to us along a unique chain of ancestors.

While each person's inheritance is unique, it is also laced with both good and evil. The past we inherit includes love, generosity, and self-honesty; but it also includes hatred, greed, and pride. This ragged history imposes on us countless assumptions about the workings of the world and how we should live. Deep within our educational, technological, political, and legal institutions lurk inherited assumptions that no one knows much about. They are impossible to list. As children we simply assume without question how our parents imagine the world. As teenagers, we begin to question some of these assumptions, but most adults still have only a slight inkling of inherited assumptions that have blinded them to certain truths and biased them against certain values. So the mission of colleges like Siena Heights is, in large part, to pass on the more enlightened views of the world and the more noble priorities of certain ancestors.

By way of example, here is a list of a few especially valuable inheritances bequeathed to us by certain ancestors: ¹ From Plato (347 BCE) we inherited the ethical idea that, besides the unique set of priorities held by each society, there are some values which are natural to all humans. From Aristotle (322 BCE) comes our ideas of "defining terms" and using "logic." From the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1274) we have the principle that no valid religious belief can be contradicted by science and no scientific theory can be contradicted by valid religious beliefs. From the English philosopher John Locke (1704) we get our idea and ideal of democracy. From the German composer Ludwig von Beethoven (1827) we inherit our conviction that music can arise from personal inspiration rather than always fit into standard rules. From Pope John XXIII (1963) Christians felt a window open to the beliefs and values of all religions. From Martin Luther King (1968) we hear the challenge to honor the civil rights of every person, regardless of race, gender, age, sexual orientation and religion.

It is easy to regard these visions of life as "normal," but in fact very few people were conscious of them prior to these tradition-founders. They are unprecedented riches that founders deeply hoped we would welcome.

Freedom

Besides being defined by our history, we also define ourselves by our own free choices. In fact, it is the free choices of every tradition-founder that broke away from some dysfunctional aspect of his or her tradition in order to launch a better tradition. Yet, just as our traditions can be a mixture of the good and the bad, so too some of our free choices may be motivated by love, generosity, and self-honesty, while others may be motivated by hate, greed, or the desire to dominate. We in our turn, through our free choices,

¹ Following each name is the date of their death. The absence of women from this list is disturbing evidence that women in most cultures were not permitted to lead in any way.

influence our children, neighbors, friends, and coworkers, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

Taken together, our historicity and our freedom not only make us the persons we happen to be. They also make our entire world what it happens to be. Different cultures and religions have certain visions of what the world is all about and how to live one's life. So, as you approach graduation, it is timely to ask, "What world vision do the Dominican founders of Siena Heights University hope to pass on to us?"

Boundaries of Animosity

I suggest that at the core of how the Dominican founders saw the world is something so simple and so pervasive that it is difficult to feel outraged or appalled about it:

The world is laced with boundaries of animosity.

We see this all through history, as families, neighbors, company departments, tribes, clubs, nations, and religions split apart. In practically every dimension of our lives there are nonsensical compartments that not only foster animosities but also imprison us in our own fears.

Some of it is the deliberate and direct hatred of other persons or groups.

Some results from believing others who hate. This can include our parents, teachers, politicians, authors, and religious leaders.

Some is simply a group suspicion of other groups, as is often the case in companies where departments refuse to cooperate with each other.

Some is a fear of anyone who seems strange. This is evident in an avoidance of people who are wounded—the depressed, the mentally handicapped, the physically handicapped, the frail elderly, the grossly overweight, the grieving, the outlandishly dressed.

Some is fostered by an unquestioning loyalty that maintains a rigid stand against parties that have offended our parents, our political party, our religion, or our ethnic group.

Some arises from irrational sex-based assumptions about the "place" of women in society and the "problem" of homosexuality.

Some is simply the split between two friends or spouses, where repeated small irritations slowly tapped a wedge between them, resulting in a death by neglect.

Some is the dysfunctional assumption among units within a company, battalion, or school, that "We cannot let any other unit outshine us."

Some is the groupism that seems hard-wired into the minds of teenagers.

The Tradition of Yeshua the Nazarene

Boundary Crosser

Of all the tradition-founders that shape our historicity, the one person whose influence is strongest in the Christian, Catholic, Dominican, Siena Heights tradition is a Palestinian Jew named Yeshua (30).² We know him by the Greek and Latin translations that come into English as "Jesus." For now, I want to refer to him as Yeshua in order to focus our attention on the exclusively historical aspects of his life. I don't mean to dismiss the religious aspect by which he was referred to as "the Christ"³ nor the later religious teachings that this man is "God from God."⁴ Rather I mean to retrieve something lost in the dense religious overlays to his significance for us, namely, his life in ordinary human history and his role as a founder of a radically new and globally influential historical tradition.

Siena Heights, after all, is not a church. Nor is it dedicated to making converts. Its doors are open to people of any or no religion. It is a university that promotes free inquiry. And one of its fundamental assumptions about free inquiry is that it should not hesitate to face, within historical-critical perspectives, any questions about our human origins and our destiny. The immediate followers of Yeshua felt these questions, as did generations of followers thereafter. These are questions that go beyond normal historical accounts of events and assessments of trends; they raise issues that only a "salvation history" can deal with by showing how humanity draws on divine help to overcome the forces of hatred, greed, and pride. I say the *questions*, not the *answers*, because free inquiry is just that—inquiry.

The New Testament provides us with nearly all the known information about Yeshua. But no document in the NT falls within our modern standards of critical history. None of its authors felt duty bound to organize verifiable facts into an account of a historical movement. They were motivated by faith to reshape inherited accounts in ways that would invite faith. Still, few historians doubt that Yeshua really did live, really did preach a "good news" of God's reign coming, really did teach and heal without regard for any social

² This is how his name probably sounded in Aramaic, his native language.

³ "Christ" is a title, not part of Yeshua's name. It means "Anointed," and the people who applied it to Yeshua understood the term to mean the "Messiah" expected by Jewish believers.

⁴ This expression was officially applied to Yeshua in 325, at the Council of Nicea. It is repeated in the many Christian churches who recite the Nicene Creed.

standing of a person, and really was crucified, most likely by Jewish and Roman authorities afraid of the news he announced.

But right here is a central, golden, thread in the tradition that Siena Heights aims to weave forward:

Yeshua crossed boundaries.

Among the accusations against him which led to his execution and which few historians dispute is that he let nothing in law or custom or politics prevent him from reaching out to others. He befriended prostitutes. He associated with tax collectors (the government agents reputed for pocketing excess taxes from ordinary people). Luke says that Yeshua praised a Samaritan for his good care of a Jewish mugging victim, despite the Jewish custom of looking down on Samaritans because they had abandoned the revered beliefs and practices upheld by Jerusalem. John reports the scandal of his conversing with a Samaritan, indeed a female, sitting by a well. He seemed never to hesitate to touch a leper or to reach out to the seriously demented. He was driven by a compassion for anyone who suffered—the blind, the deaf, the lame, the paralyzed, the epileptic, a soldier with a sick servant, a widow with a dead son. He drove money-changers out of the Temple. He denounced the ambition to be served, in favor of being always the servant of others. He challenged the rich and regarded the poor as much closer to the Kingdom of God. He would break Jewish Sabbath laws by his "work" of healing. He retained the company of the man he expected to betray him. What counted for him was not a personage but the person. He refused to show demeaning deference to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea; he wouldn't kowtow to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee.

His immediate followers clearly recognized that he wanted to give them his own inner spirit, a spirit of a love that builds bridges, crosses boundaries, breaches walls, and heals animosities. The writers among them convey this vision all throughout the NT.

An Imperative

Boundary crossing is a vital imperative in the tradition that Siena Heights wants you to carry forward. Wherever you are, aim to build bridges between people and between groups that have drifted apart. Breach the walls that separate people for no good reason. Keep your eyes open to the wounds of others, and your heart ready to come to their aid. Consider all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that you gained from Siena Heights as your equipment for making peace.

Besides relying on the example and desires of Yeshua of Nazareth, rely on the love in your own heart. He and his immediate followers were completely confident that love is a miracle, a gift, and the most powerful healing force in the world. They show no nostalgia for the bygone days when Yeshua

preached and healed because they were convinced that he bequeathed them his own living spirit of love.

And, if you find yourself resonating with his vision and desires, if you feel a kind of invitation to "walk with him," don't hesitate to face the question of God squarely. The historical evidence is quite strong that he called God "Abba," meaning "dear father," and that he had no doubt that God/Abba filled him with his own love. Moreover, the evidence is overwhelming that his followers came to regard Yeshua himself and the spirit of love which he passed on to them as God's gift of his own self to humanity for all eternity. This conviction—that Yeshua and his loving spirit are God's *gift of self*—is the basis of the later Christian teaching that God is somehow three: a *source* who is love, an uttered *word* of love, and a joyful *power* to love.⁵



Think Critically

Of course, boundaries are good things when they observe natural differences or effectively organize our social institutions into different functions. Boundaries are as natural as family units and distinct genders, as the differences between helpers and the helped, as the hierarchies of leadership, as the varieties in languages and traditions, as the pass/fail criteria we use to ensure quality education, and as the certifications we require of professionals. The problem is not the fact of boundaries, but the ways we use them to maintain suspicion, hatred, the irrational myths we have about other groups, as well as myths we have about the superiority of our own. The problem is a disease of the heart.

So we need to think critically about the boundaries in our lives. I suggest that we experience these boundaries not only in our social lives but also in the privacy of our hearts. Let me finish with a few words about each.

Social Boundaries & Discernment of Stories

As I say, boundaries are good when they express what is natural to humans, and humans are naturally open-minded, creative and caring. We see the results all through history in happy families, vibrant neighborhoods, cities

⁵ Nobody has fully explained how one God can be Father, Son, and Spirit. But we have a good analogy in the manner by which our being in love expresses itself doubly: in seeing the truly better and taking action based on love. Where this occurs we are a wholesome unity.

that work, companies of dedicated employees working together to provide needed goods and services to the public, and peace-making nations. But the natural openness of the human spirit is not total. Fear, ambition, and hate close down our natural openness. The family of God is fragmented by irrational and mean-spirited boundaries of animosity.

To cross these social boundaries, it is crucial to think critically about the stories people tell us. While some of "what *we* folks all know about *those* folks," has grains of truth, rarely does *our* knowledge of *those others* come close to understanding them at a depth that justifies avoiding, ridiculing, ignoring or harming them.

So the very first step in crossing social boundaries is to "discern stories."⁶ This means being careful what we swallow. One clue that we believe a false story presented to us by our community is the phenomenon of closed access. Are there places you cannot go? Are there people you cannot approach? Materials you cannot use? Services you cannot avail yourself of? Places where you are "out of place?" In many such cases, there are hidden vested interests at work keeping you "in your place." Or have you closed access to others, putting yourself behind closed doors, whether in a self-imposed exile or on a pedestal of honor? Does your station or title prevent others from approaching you?

Boundaries of the Heart & Discernment of Inspirations

By "heart," I don't mean the fluid pump in our chests. I mean the impulse to love in ways that are attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible. By this definition, love is the inner power that opens wide our eyes, our minds, our realism, and our care.



We experience the power of love as inspirations. We don't create our inspirations. They arise from within under a power of their own. We feel moved to say this, do that, or *not* say this and *not* do that. When our inspirations spring from love, we reach out to others; we engage them; we welcome them as companions in the struggles of life; we ache when they ache and laugh when they laugh. Unfortunately, we also experience the power of fear and ambition and hate in the same way.

When these propel our inspirations, we pull back from others, we dodge them, we compete with them for the goods of the earth, we smile at their tears and frown at their joys. In short, we build irrational boundaries around our hearts.

⁶ I have published my own set. See "Rules for Discerning Stories" at <http://users.wowway.com/~tdunne5273/DiscStor.pdf>.

Here, the very first step in crossing the boundaries of the heart is to "discern inspirations." This means being careful to distinguish, among our spontaneous desires, those that resonate with our natural instinct to love and those in which we feel a dissonance with our best love. In the early 1500s, Ignatius Loyola wrote a series of rules for discerning inspirations, which are well worth studying.⁷ The principle that underlies them all is whether any inspiration we feel springs from real love or from fear or ambition or hate.

An Invitation

So the tradition that the Dominican sisters hope you will carry forward has at least these two, interconnected efforts. First is that you cross boundaries in the style of Jesus the Nazarene. Second is that you rely on the gift of love within you to think critically about both stories you hear and the inspirations you feel.

Think of it as their invitation. Taste and see whether their vision of the world and the imperatives they actually live by do not bring you a deep-set joy in the midst of any troubles.

And if their invitation stirs in you both a desire and a fear of being holy, then call to mind these, your sisters, who have dedicated their lives to being critically-minded boundary crossers. Remember the joy on their faces.

⁷ I have published a version updated to reflect modern developments in psychology and in a philosophy of the person based not on faculties but on functions. See "Rules for Discerning Inspirations" at <http://users.wowway.com/~tdunne5273/DisclInsp.pdf>.