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Our Universities: Eighteen Inches

Each person's head and heart, the twin seats of our identity, lie just eighteen inches apart, about a cubit. The connection between them is being stretched to the breaking point by universities and other institutions that have tried desperately to suggest that progress is only possible when the two are disconnected, with only objective experience being valued.

At a 1941 symposium on the intersection between science, religion, and philosophy, Einstein said, "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

Amanda Geffer, Opinion editor, The New Science

I stood beside a swimming pool two or three times a week for two years watching my sons flailing at the water trying to shrink their time in a 25 yard spurt of breaststroke, backstroke, butterfly, and free medley.

Next to me, week after week, stood a fellow who became my friend – Mike, an affable guy, ruddy complexion, committed to doing things well, a good scholar and a stunning example of an Irish Catholic. He watched his daughter while I watched my sons. As you might imagine the nuances of the various swim strokes were quickly vacated for more engaging chit-chat.

As happens over time we became friendly, and discussions we had over the din of the children learning and playing turned to topics friends can engage that acquaintances can't. Mike was penetrating in his analysis of the human condition.

He also cussed like a sailor, and relentlessly and unreservedly voiced his disdain for the Catholic Church. Yet every week, he took his daughter from the swimming pool to Catechism. Never missed a beat.

One day I asked him about the apparent inconsistency between his complaints and his actions. He said without hesitation or apology that his daughter needed something to rebel against and the Catholic Church was a perfect foil.

I started to object, but he was steadfast. He felt that, even though he disagreed with the church's stance on any number of topics, that everyone needed some fixed point from which to navigate. A personal North Star.

I'm not sure he fully believed what he told me, I never could get that out of him despite my best efforts. I know he was sincere about instilling a moral standard, even one that had imperfections, distortions, defects, tears, and stains.

Aside from the fact that my frame of reference was exactly the opposite of his, I agreed with his logic. Informed by my relationship with God, I have found in Christ an example that is perfect, clear, whole, consistent, and faultless. I guess you could say I have a different personal Star, the one that rose over Bethlehem.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to start a tradition that included bringing faculty, staff and friends of a university together to wish each other well during the holiday season. After an hour of visiting, a pianist accompanied hundreds of us, physicists and plumbers, teachers and trainers, groundskeepers and geologists, secretaries and scholars as we sang (I may be generous calling it that) Christmas songs. To this day, I think of that noise we made, and hear music in my heart ...you know...the one that is eighteen inches from my head.

It was joyful.

It didn't mean the same thing to everyone, but I think it meant something to everybody, even if only that we belong to something bigger than just ourselves.

The tree, gifts, families, friends, and the other secular trappings touched common memories, and we all knew that we weren't alone in the dark, cold night. We did not have to share a single meaning to find meaning in the shared experience.

But we could sing, drink coffee, eat cookies, and acknowledge each other.

I'm convinced that that day reduced the distance between the hearts and heads of hundreds of dedicated servants from eighteen inches to zero, if only for an instant.

It seems the job of modernism and the modern world to separate head and heart. This eighteen-inch distance is wreaking havoc on universities, the people who populate them, and in turn, our social order.

Contrary to what some physicists and biologists think, science and ethics can coexist quite nicely. There should be room for this discussion on university campuses.

Science is not Truth. Science is a method for finding a particular kind of truth. Other methods let you find truths science cannot; truths that can lead us to become who we need to be, and help us build stronger communities.

When we only accept the icy standards of measurable phenomena, we diminish the reach of higher education, and eighteen inches becomes an impossible distance.

Thanks for your indulgences. It must be that time of year.