



FOREWORD

Speaking Across Differences as Essential to a Liberal Education

BY LYNN PASQUERELLA

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As someone whose life has been ruled by the academic calendar and whose career has centered on championing the enduring value of liberal education, I am often asked to comment on transformative moments in my own undergraduate studies. One of the most profound experiences I had was the result of taking a comparative religion course through the Five College Consortium, exploring the philosophies of Frederick Douglass, St. Augustine, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. It was team-taught by professors from Mount Holyoke, Hampshire College, and Smith College, with rotating meetings on each of the three campuses. I remember how excited I was to be taking a class with my undergraduate advisor—a religion professor from Mount Holyoke—and eagerly awaited his arrival. That feeling of joyful anticipation soon turned to dread, however, as he announced that no one in the class would be allowed to take notes throughout the semester. He wanted to give us a glimpse of what it was like for enslaved African Americans, who were prevented from learning to read or write, to be forced to recollect and recount their experiences through oral traditions.

That simple but brilliant teaching technique was one example of many that provided me with an education that shaped my life. I came to understand the power of moral imagination—imagining what it is like to be in the shoes of another different from oneself. By comparing the religious principles underlying Douglass’s philosophy with those of Augustine and non-Western metaphysical tenets in the *Bhagavad Gita*, I discovered that the beliefs we adopt around the most fundamental questions of human existence depend, in part, on whose stories are being told and who is empowered to speak.

These lessons were foundational to the type of education that philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum refers to as an “education for human development” (2009, 8), leading to a “world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as equals, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate” (2009, 13). Ultimately, an education for human development is inextricably linked to global justice and global citizenship, requiring not only the academic skills but also the practical competence and ethical motivation to address global problems.

Institutions of higher education of all types have both the opportunity and the responsibility to provide curricular and cocurricular learning experiences that offer practice in speaking across religious, political, and social differences, embracing diversity as an essential component of educational excellence. At a time when political polarization in the United States is greater than it has been since the Civil War (Paisley 2016) and when nearly three in ten Americans report that the COVID-19 pandemic has made their faith stronger (Pew Research Center 2021), there is a renewed sense of urgency around the work catalyzed by Interfaith Youth Core in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities. We are grateful for our ongoing collaboration and look forward to supporting you in achieving our shared objectives.

REFERENCES

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