

Inspiring Faith and Engaging Reality Promoting Civic Virtue in a Secular Age

Mark Ravizza, SJ

For the past eight years, I have taught at the *Casa de la Solidaridad* in El Salvador and *Casa Bayanihan* in Manila. The Casa programs are alternative, study-abroad semesters that transform students by immersing them in materially poor communities and then integrating that experience through rigorous academic analysis, spiritual formation, and simple community living.

To illustrate how this pedagogy works, let me begin with a story that a student, Susan, told after spending the weekend with a family in her “praxis community”:

The mother of the family, Oti, and I were cooking lunch. The night before, I had been bitten all over by bugs, and as the kitchen grew hotter, my legs started to itch like crazy. The more I scratched, the worse they got. When Oti looked down and saw my legs covered with swollen, red bug bites, she told me that she had a little medicine, a “special ointment,” that she had been saving since some visitors had given it to her a few years ago. She went into her bedroom and returned with a small tube of cream half full. I put out my hand expecting that she would give me a bit of the lotion to put on my legs. But instead, Oti squeezed the entire tube into her own two hands, and then got down on her knees and began to massage the cream gently into my burning skin.¹

As we discussed this story in class, Susan’s eyes filled with tears. She asked:

Why did I assume that Oti would just put a drop of lotion in my hand? And why, instead, did she put everything she had into her own hands, and then lavish it so generously on me? The cream was a gift she had been saving for months. She doesn’t have the money to buy more. I didn’t deserve it or have any right to it, and yet for Oti this was the only natural thing to do. Why do I see the world so differently from how she does?

Earlier in class we had been comparing an “ethic of justice” with an “ethic of care,” but our conversation took on a new depth when viewed through the lens of Susan’s

experience. Students began to contrast the individualistic ways they lived with the more communitarian sense of care they experienced in their praxis sites, and this led to a very different understanding of civic virtue. But the richness of the experience was not limited to intellectual insights. Susan also shared that the moment had been marked by a surprising grace: “As Oti massaged my legs with such care, I felt a tremendous warmth and light around me. It was as if God’s love was flowing through Oti’s hands, a love I had been seeking for such a long time.” Marie Howe’s poem *Annunciation* beautifully captures the type of moment Susan described:

...it was a tilting within myself
as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn’t—I was blinded like that—and swam
in what shone at me...

As we think about faith, freedom, and civic virtue, we should keep Susan’s story in mind. I say this for three reasons. First, in a secular age, when the faith of our students is often embattled, discarded, or irrelevant, we need creative, new ways to allow a lived faith to make a claim across the curriculum. A central thesis that I want to propose is that to cultivate civic virtue, we need to get students out of the classroom and have them engage reality in a way that also opens up new horizons of faith.

Second, Susan is, in many ways, emblematic of the type of young person we need to keep in our hearts as we think about faith and virtue. I am sure you know them. They are smart, talented, well-educated but also on a path to lead very self-focused lives filled with distractions. Often they come from no specific faith tradition, or they are questioning their faith, and yet there is something that wants to be at play in their life, something calling them to a different and more expansive way of being in the world. In many ways they are at a crossroads. So many forces in their life are pushing them toward isolation, superficiality, and self-involvement, but a still, quiet, inner voice calls them in a different direction, to a life given in service of others. So much depends on whether we, as educators, can animate that quiet, inner voice and encourage students to follow their deepest and freest desires.

My third reason for beginning with Susan is that I suspect we all have had moments like my conversation with her, moments when what is happening in the classroom blends seamlessly with real life. In these moments, ideas connect powerfully with lived experience. Education becomes transformation. Our work seems to be not so much about *our* syllabus, but about *God’s*. We all know those moments, don’t we? It is as if God sits up and exclaims, “This is what I was waiting for. This is where new life is claimed and freedom begins.” If you have had these moments, you know the feelings of

confirmation they evoke: "This is why I do what I do. This is why teaching matters." Let's call these sorts of moments, "vocational moments." Educators need to ask themselves, "Where have we encountered such moments, and how might we place ourselves in contexts where we could have more of them?" Let's be honest: it can be hard at times to stay connected to such vocational moments, whether they be accompanying a student, or being inspired in our research, or witnessing the fruits of our administrative service. Days can turn into months, and months into years, and slowly we can stop even missing the life that first called us here. We can settle for functional jobs instead of continuing to take risks, instead of continuing to seek that inspiration we once knew.

Vocational Moments and Freedom

Let us heed the poet's words and tilt toward the light that first illuminated us. So much depends upon the place from which our conversation flows. To speak creatively, insightfully, and productively about issues as complex and well-worn as faith, freedom, and virtue is not easy, but how different might our conversations be if we can center (or re-center) ourselves at the outset in those moments of annunciation?

In my own history, attending to these types of vocational moments has made all the difference, leading me from a fairly traditional academic path to doing things far different than I ever imagined. In many ways, this journey started ten years ago when Santa Clara University was awarded a Lilly Theological Exploration of Vocation Grant. One of the images we used to help students discern their vocation came from a well-known quote by Frederick Buechner:

VOCATION. It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God... The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. (Buechner 1993)

The more I pondered this quote with my students, the more I reflected on my own vocation. I had found a comfortable niche: I was tenured, enjoying my teaching and research, directing a residential learning community, advancing toward administrative service. Yet as I read Buechner's quote, I began to wonder, "Is this all there is?"

At the same time, I was seeing students come back from our Casa program in El Salvador on fire, completely transformed. Their faith was stronger; they wanted to reach out in service; they were filled with hope. More was happening in four months in

Central America than I could bring about in four years with my residential learning community in California. I had to ask, "Why?" In search of answers, I went to El Salvador to work with the Casa program. That experience changed me and completely changed the way I think about education. A different kind of learning was taking place there, a learning that not only engaged the head, but touched the heart, a learning that called students to live more expansively, and to be in touch with a wider, more interconnected world. An old truism says, "We cannot give what we do not have." Similarly, I learned that, "We cannot teach what we do not know and live." Listening to vocational moments, whether they be in the classroom, or in our research, or service is crucial, because such moments keep us alive as educators. They draw us to where "our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Yet, following these vocational promptings requires a profound sense of freedom.

How does freedom fit with the promotion of civic virtue? Typically we think of academic freedom in terms of a liberty to seek openly the truth in our teaching and research without unwarranted restrictions. Thought of in this way, it comprises two dimensions: (1) *a freedom from* negative constraints such as censorship, undue institutional interference, and fear of reprisal; (2) *a freedom for* positive activities such as self-expression, open conversation, and the discovery and sharing of the true, good, and beautiful.

However, there is a related and perhaps deeper sense of freedom in the academy, one that also bears on how effectively we educate. This concerns how free we are not just in the content of our teaching and inquiry, but also in the very practice of how we educate. In particular, are we free to take risks and to imagine new ways to teach and innovate? The academy's own expectations can constrain us. Pressures of faculty activity reports, US News and World Report rankings, bureaucratic structures, accreditation demands, and professional standing can all exert subtle and not-so-subtle influences that encourage us to maintain the status quo and to ignore that still, small voice that beckons us to break out of the mold, to follow our vocational moments, and to do something creatively that really matters. Can we encourage one another to resist these forces of conformity and dream together of truly innovative ways to foster faith and civic virtue?

Framing the Problem: Civic Blindness and the Need for Communal Care

Let's adopt a roughly Aristotelian approach to virtue, and define it as a disposition of character to act in the right way, at the right time, toward the right objects, with the right feelings. Civic virtue then, might be thought of as that set of virtues that leads one to act in the right way toward the community and, in particular, to promote the common good. Faith-based institutions, in an increasingly secularized world, struggle

to know how to promote this common good while simultaneously respecting academic freedom and staying true to their missions. However, before moving too quickly to a single-minded focus on this natural way of framing the problem, I would like to describe two other challenges that today confront any institution dedicated to educating for civic virtue.

Every generation suffers from moral blindness. For example, we find it incomprehensible that a previous generation would have thought it permissible to enslave other human beings because they had darker skin or that it was morally acceptable to deny to certain humans the right to vote simply because they were women. Recognizing such moral blindness in other ages, challenges us to ask, "What moral wrongs don't we see today?" Reflecting on this at the turn of the century, Richard Rorty anticipated how future generations would look back on our time:

Just as 20th century Americans had trouble imagining how their pre-Civil War ancestors could have stomached slavery, so we at the end of the 21st century have trouble imagining how our great-grandparents could have legally permitted a C.E.O. to get 20 times more than her lowest-paid employees. We cannot understand how Americans a hundred years ago could have tolerated the horrific contrast between a childhood spent in the suburbs and one spent in the ghetto. Such inequalities seem to us evident moral abominations, but the vast majority of our ancestors took them to be regrettable necessities. (Rorty, 155)

Sadly, since Rorty wrote this in 1996, the disparity of wealth has gotten worse, not better. In 2012 the average CEO earned 350 times more than the average worker; in the most egregious case, the CEO of J. C. Penny's, Ron Johnson, earned 1,795 times more than the average Penny's employee (Hiltzik 2013). This increasing inequality has given rise to deepening divisions and polarization as evinced in the Occupy Movement that dramatically highlighted the fact that in 2010 the top 20 percent of Americans owned nearly 89 percent of the country's wealth and the bottom 80 percent of the population owned 11 percent. The richest 1 percent owned 35.4 percent (Domhoff 2013).

Rorty argued that to respond to this disparity of wealth, our society needed to change in the future: "Today [in 1996] morality is thought of neither as a matter of applying the moral law nor as the acquisition of virtues but as fellow feeling, the ability to sympathize with the plight of others" (158). Rorty saw that to correct the growing inequality of our times, we could not simply reinforce traditional accounts of morality and virtue. Rather, we needed to address deeper social conditions and develop a type of "communal care." Such care is not just a feeling of goodwill, but a compassion that flows from a lived awareness of how individual selves and community are inextricably

interconnected. In the Philippines, our students are often introduced to this type of communal care through the Filipino notion of *Kapwa*. It is a term that defies easy translation, but for our purposes it might be thought of as the “recognition of a shared identity, an inner self shared with others” (de Guia 2008). To illustrate how *Kapwa* appears in daily life let me share a story.

At the start of this semester, one of our students in Manila, whom I will call Charles, was helping out with a feeding program in a grade school at a relocation settlement. The school has 9,000 students with 1,300 first graders in twenty-six classrooms. As he entered a classroom with his pitcher of warm milk to serve, the children stopped to stare. Charles is about 6’3” of Cuban, African, Norwegian descent, and the wide eyes of the students all clearly signaled that they knew he was not from around the neighborhood. After he finished pouring the milk, one of the smallest girls in the class came forward to offer him the little snack she had been given. Seeing how malnourished she was, Charles naturally tried to refuse, but when he noticed a deep sadness filling her eyes, he changed course and gratefully accepted the crackers. Immediately two other first-graders came forward to offer him their food as well. (I imagine they were thinking, “This guy is so big, he probably will need more than one of our little snacks.”) As Charles shared this story in class, he held up his backpack:

I am still carrying those snacks around. I can’t stop thinking about how those girls would rather go hungry than have me, a visitor, feel left out. And I ask myself, “How have I welcomed the stranger?” If I came across a visitor in San Francisco, I would barely take time to give them directions, much less miss a meal so that they would feel at home. I want it to be different next time...

In moments like these there is no need to lecture about civic virtue; reality speaks. My work with students leads me to believe that our “civic blindness” does not stem from intentional malice on the part of the privileged. Rather it is fostered by being insulated and distracted from the lives of those suffering around us. Unfortunately such distraction is encouraged by what Adolfo Nicolás, SJ has termed, a “Globalization of Superficiality” (Nicolás 2011). This is a second challenge I invite us to consider.

Superficiality and the Need for Depth of Imagination

We live in a world of fast food, instant coffee, and instant answers; a world where friendship is a click on Facebook and conversations are reduced to a text or tweet; a world where getting the real thing is as easy as buying a Coke. Instead of grappling with original thought, we “cut and paste.” The technology that connects us also fragments and distracts us. Our heads are buried in iPhones; our consciousness is easily

reduced to the images flickering across our screens. We are exporting not just products from the US but an entire superficial way of being in the world. And this is affecting every aspect of our lives.

One afternoon I had been working with some street children in Manila. As I was leaving, a little girl approached me: "Father, can I ask you something?" Clearly she was hungry, so I began digging in my pocket to see if I had any pesos. Then, she finished her request: "Can I friend you on Facebook?" I was at a loss for words. Here was a young girl without enough to eat, and she wanted to spend the little money she had to be on Facebook at the Internet café. What would it really mean to befriend her in this way?

The globalization of superficiality is leading to a different sense of self, one that is guided by what Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster have termed a "Gospel of Authenticity":

Despite the frequent claim that we are living in a secular age defined by the death of God, many citizens in rich Western democracies have merely switched one notion of God for another—abandoning their singular, omnipotent (Christian or Judaic or whatever) deity reigning over all humankind and replacing it with a weak but all-pervasive idea of spirituality tied to a personal ethic of authenticity and a liturgy of inwardness. (2013)

Critchley and Webster claim that the Gospel of Authenticity is leading to a shallow, individualized sense of vocation: "In the gospel of authenticity, well-being has become the primary goal of human life. Rather than being the by-product of some collective project, some upbuilding of the New Jerusalem, well-being is an end in itself." As I said before, I don't believe that our students who lack an understanding of communal care are bad people, but I do think that they are increasingly shaped by a Gospel of Authenticity and a superficial sense of vocation that looks at my own life and asks, "How do I flourish?" but sees that question as disconnected from the needs of others.

In response to this globalization of superficiality, Adolfo Nicolás has argued that we must "promote in creative new ways [a] depth of thought and imagination" (2). At first blush, this emphasis on imagination can seem strange to academics, because often at universities we think of reason as the engine that drives the academic train, and the imagination is, at best, a creative interior decorator that brightens up the passenger cars. In contrast, Nicolás is suggesting that the imagination has a far more central role to play, and to see why, consider this story:

Years ago, when I was first teaching at Santa Clara University, I lived in a first-year residence hall. During the first weekend of orientation, a young man, Joe, came into my room and exclaimed, "I love Santa Clara University; I love being a Bronco; I love my classes; I love my professors; and I just met the girl I am going to marry. She was at orientation. I looked across the room, our eyes met, and I knew that she was the one." Well, you know how these things go. Within a week Joe and his beloved, Julie, were inseparable. Then another few weeks passed, and Joe came into my room completely heartbroken. He looked like the "Underground Man." Between tears he told me, "I just don't know how I can go on. Julie broke my heart. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can't bear to go to class for fear of running into her." This grief continued for a few weeks, until one day the dark clouds suddenly lifted. Joe was a new person. Excitedly he told me, "You will never believe it. I now realize that I needed to suffer through my breakup with Julie to prepare me for Veronica. She is everything Julie was not. Now I finally know who is the one for me." Once again the pattern repeated itself: for a few weeks Joe and his Veronica were inseparable; then he ended up in my room, worse than before. He was despondent. He couldn't study; he was thinking about transferring; he wanted to know if it was hard to become a Jesuit. And the truly puzzling thing was that this pattern repeated itself not once, not twice, not three times, but four times in the first two quarters of his freshman year. As a young philosopher, I tried to use the Socratic method to help him learn from his mistakes, but nothing worked. Then one day I had a breakthrough. We were talking about movies, and I asked him about his favorite films. He listed the most sentimental, romantic movies you can imagine: *Say Anything*, *Serendipity*, *The Notebook*. These are not bad movies. They are fine on a Friday night if you want some diversion. Still most of us don't take them literally. But Joe did. He was the only son of a single mother, and the only images he had of married life and romantic commitment came from what he saw on the silver screen. Given the movies he watched, no amount of heartbreak or experience would ever teach him. For him all those disastrous relationships were just evidence that he hadn't met "the one" yet. But he knew what it would be like when he did meet her. It would look just like the movies.

Nothing is more important than our imagination. Joe couldn't learn from his own experience, because the images that informed that experience trapped him in a world of fantasy. In contrast, what makes an imagination deep is that it provides images that enable us to see beyond surface illusions and to penetrate reality more fully.

Appreciating the importance of the imagination prompts us to ask, "What are the images we are giving our students? Are we resisting the flight into fantasy that so much of our popular culture is encouraging? If so, what images are we offering in their place?"

Fostering Care and Depth by Engaging Reality

Thus far I have touched on two challenges to civic virtue. The first is “civic blindness” that stems from a lack of “fellow feeling” and a missing empathy for the plight of others. The second is a “globalization of superficiality” that fosters a shallow sense of self and vocation, and engenders an impoverished imagination of how one might be in the world. To combat civic blindness, we need to cultivate communal care. To respond to the globalization of superficiality, we need to promote depth of thought and imagination. Fortunately, these two projects are not unrelated. Civic virtue flows from the development of communal care and depth of imagination, and the same type of educational experiences can foster both of these. According to Adolfo Nicolás this process begins when students fully engage the reality of our suffering world:

Depth of thought and imagination... involves a profound engagement with the real, a refusal to let go until one goes beneath the surface.... The starting point, then, will always be what is real: what is materially, concretely thought to be there: The world as we encounter it; the world of the senses so vividly described in the Gospels themselves; a world of suffering and need, a broken world with many broken people in need of healing. We start there. We don't run away from there. (4)

This initial engagement with profound suffering leads to transformation, Nicolás suggests, if we can help students encounter the activity of grace amidst the brokenness:

[We begin with] a world of suffering and need, a broken world with many broken people in need of healing... And then Ignatius guides us... as he did his retreatants, to enter into the depths of that reality. Beyond what can be perceived most immediately, he leads one to see the hidden presence and action of God in what is seen, touched, smelt, felt. And that encounter with what is deepest changes the person. (4)

Naturally, this pedagogy of transformation varies greatly from student to student. And though there is no single recipe, I would like to flesh out its dynamics (which we touched on in our opening story of Susan) by describing a quite different case.

Erin was a Casa student in the Philippines, and her praxis site was Sitio Payong, a community of informal settlers surrounded by some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Manila. The community is separated from its affluent neighbors by a gated fence that is locked each night from 8 pm to 6 am, effectively making people prisoners in their own homes. Lacking both electricity and running water, the families of Sitio Payong must carry buckets of water into their homes from a faucet outside the gate. When Erin first visited the community she was overwhelmed:

I can still remember the fear I felt. I remember thinking to myself, *I shouldn't be here. This place is not for someone like me. I am not strong enough to look [at] all of this death, disease, injustice...* I was still separate from this reality, an outsider coming in. I could not feel their pain or know their reality. It was like they were inside a snow globe that I was able to hold in my hand and see but never actually touch, the glass a physical representation of the very real barrier I saw between my lives and theirs.

Gradually, however, as Erin befriended the community and became part of the rhythm of their daily lives, her perceptions changed. As so often happens, profound transformation began in a most ordinary way: one day a group of young girls asked Erin to teach them ballet. They had always dreamed of dancing, but never had the money for lessons. Their request was simple, but for Erin it proved to be one of those vocational moments that we spoke of earlier.

As she taught the girls to dance, Erin entered more fully into their lives. She learned how hard they worked, and the sacrifices they made to carve out time to practice. As a sign of respect, they would bathe before every lesson, even though that meant carrying in more water by hand. Erin was humbled by their dedication. During the lessons, she would tell them, "OK, one more time and then we will take a break." And the girls would reply, "No. Not one more time. Five more times. Ten more times. A hundred more times." One afternoon as we watched these young girls dance in a rice field, Erin pointed out their expressions: "I always wanted to teach dancers in Boston to have that look—a gaze of concentrated beauty—but I never succeeded till now." "

As Adolfo Nicolás predicts, as Erin engaged the reality of Sitio Payong more deeply, God's presence also was revealed there in new ways. Erin wrote in her journal:

I was walking up the path in front of Ate Fe's house, her garden was to the right of me and to the left was the barren land of Sitio Payong Area 2, where the Philippine Heart Center who owned the land had destroyed all of the houses a few years - earlier. I turned the corner past her garden and I was stopped in my steps by something bigger, a wonder and connection I had never felt before. At this place in the path the trees cleared and I was able to see out over the fields of Sitio Payong spreading out into the Tumana River, the Muslim village across the river with the gold top of the mosque peeking over the small crumbling homes. Then in the background were the mountains, green and huge with grand villas and estates nestled within their shade. And behind that was the big, big, sky, hazy near the mountains, but then a deep blue; and it was holding everything, all of the beauty, the suffering, the inequality, the fraternity. I didn't see everything individually

though like I am describing it now. It was this big sense of something holding me and me being connected to it, involved with everything around me and I could not separate myself from it. I felt that the world was so much bigger than I had ever known before but also I felt an overwhelming sense of peace that it was all held together but not by me.

By the end of the semester, Sitio Payong had completely changed for Erin, and it had changed her. What once was a place of fear had become not only a second home, but also a sanctuary, a place filled with grace. Erin's time in the community helped her to develop civic virtue, to enliven her faith, and to reimagine how she might live. In a final paper, she reflected on her emerging sense of vocation:



My [own] self will is based in nothing but what I think I should be doing, making decisions regarding where I think I should be going but in reality, I have no idea. When I am able to bypass this self-will for a bigger will I can say yes to things that are filled with mystery, and in opening myself to the presence of this bigness I am more susceptible to

grace. This feels like such a radical movement [to come] from just teaching a ballet class to seven girls twice a week but it helped to free me in a deep sense and took me back to that first image of the sky holding all of the pain and beauty in one.

Something bigger than me is present with me and if I can be present to it, it can lead me to myself.... I need to continue to say yes to things like this ballet, to be present to the people and relations [like these]. It is hard to know which things lead me here, but having touched this feeling... in Sitio Payong I now know what to look for... The people of Sitio Payong have taught me how to love, how to hope, how to find freedom and most importantly how none of these things are possible without standing in relation with one another, walking together, laughing together, struggling together, and having our realities bound up as one.

In one sense, Erin's story is unique, but in another it is completely emblematic of what happens when students have sustained contact with the poor. Erin came to see their

world with new eyes. Her faith deepened. She began to imagine their world and her life in a deeper more interconnected way, and this naturally led her to want to care for those she had been given to love. Most importantly, she came to know the feeling that could guide her discernment as she continued to seek a life shaped by civic virtue and a quest for the common good.

How Do We Bring this Pedagogy Back to Our Campuses?

It is so hard in our contemporary world to talk about faith, to talk about God, to talk about service. Yet over and over again, I have seen the truth of the old adage that God is especially present with those who suffer most. When we invite our students to go to those difficult places, they touch that grace, and that grace changes them. Fortunately, we do not need to travel to Asia or Central America to encounter such moments. They can be found around all of our campuses. However, we must bear in mind that experiences of immersion are only a first step. If they are to produce civic virtue, they must be processed and integrated with three other aspects of university life that all too often remain disconnected.

1. Academic Analysis. Direct contact with serious human suffering can leave students confused and off-balance. It also can elicit their own brokenness and invite them to grapple with issues that had long been buried. Thus we cannot responsibly insert students into the world's pain if we don't also bring these experiences into the classroom where they can be integrated, analyzed, and processed in a holistic way. This demands a style of teaching that departs sharply from traditional lecture halls. The lived experience of students must itself become a central text of our classes, and this requires us to be free enough to follow where that experience leads, even when it does not neatly fit with what is planned on a syllabus.

2. Spiritual Formation. When we bring authentic experience into the classroom, learning takes on a new life. But these experiences are never just about ideas. They touch the heart as well as the head, and they raise large, existential questions about vocation, the meaning of life, and the nature of God. If we have the courage to ask, often we will find that immersion experiences open students up not just to new ways of thinking, but also to new senses of transcendence, or grace, or even God. For this reason, academic analysis must be supplemented with a spiritual formation that provides spaces of silence, prayer, and discernment.

3. Community. Lastly, all these experiences of direct contact, academic analysis, and spiritual formation need to be integrated and held together in community. One of the best places for students to begin to learn the value of civic virtue and the common good

is through their own experience of community living. Although on many campuses it is not feasible to return to the integrated living and learning of small, residential colleges, we can nevertheless continue to challenge ourselves to create communal structures that give students a chance to process their experiences with peers, to learn together, and to inhabit the civic virtues and communal care that we are trying to teach.

An Experience of Wonder

I would like to close with one last story. Willie, a student of mine in Manila was spending the weekend in a community of street vendors that sells taho (a tofu custard served with sweet syrup). He had risen early, at 5 am, to prepare the taho with the father of the family, Tatay Fermin. Then they had spent hours walking through the streets, selling in the hot sun. At the end of the day, after paying off bills and expenses, they had earned only about fifty-five pesos—a little more than a dollar. Realizing how this shortfall would hurt the family, Willie found himself recalling his own family's struggles when he was a boy, and he fell into a dark silence as he angrily reflected on the injustice of the situation and Tatay Fermin's plight. Although Willie said nothing about his darkening mood, Tatay Fermin seemed not only to perceive it, but also to understand. He suggested that Willie join him for a Bible study followed by a gathering at one of the church members' homes. Willie shares what happened next:



So I step into this lady's house. And I see a whole bunch of people. They are sitting around laughing and eating. There is food everywhere. And they are saying, "Come in. Come in," and I am super excited. And I start munching and mingling. When we leave, we are walking down the street, me, Tatay Fermin and his wife, Nanay Thelma. It is about 9 o'clock at night. And he just grabs my hand... just casual... just walking down the street... holding my hand. Then Nanay Thelma moves on this side and she grabs my hand too. And we are just walking down the street and I'm like, "Oh, my goodness, this is the

most magical night ever." When we get to his house, we are standing outside and I'm just telling him, "This was a GREAT night... tonight was so beautiful. Thank

you so much." And he just kind of smiles and looks at me. And then he puts his hand on me, almost like, you've been living in America all this time and you haven't figured this out yet. And he just looks at me and says: "Willie... *every night is beautiful!*"

Every night is beautiful. In many ways the transformation that our community partners experience is as profound as that experienced by our students. Once at the end of a semester, Tatay Fermin said to me, "Please send us more students. I will always be glad to welcome them into my home. Before your students came I sold *taho*; now I am also a *teacher*." Willie had lost hope. But Tatay Fermin knew what Willie needed to learn: every night is beautiful. And Tatay Fermin could teach this because he had stayed in touch with the shining moments of annunciation all around him.

We began with annunciations, and with those I would like to close. Like Tatay Fermin, we need to be the kind of educators who can give our students hope. We need to be the kind of professors who can call people to something bigger. We need to be the kind of people who can tell young students, "Go to what is real, engage it, and don't be afraid of the suffering because you will find grace there and you will find life." But we cannot be those kinds of educators unless we ourselves stay in touch with that same reality, unless we ourselves keep tilting toward that light, even in those moments when we do not feel it. For, as Marie Howe says, "if once it hailed me, it ever does."

Mark Ravizza, SJ is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Santa Clara University and is currently serving as Director of Mission and Ministry for Casa Bayanihan.

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Endnote

1. I am grateful to my students who have allowed me to share their stories for this essay. Their stories are adapted from formal entries and papers, as well as conversations inside and outside the classroom. In all cases, I have changed some names and details to respect the privacy of those involved. I have discussed Susan's story in Ravizza 2010.

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