

“Reimagine Your Life”

New Student Convocation
Academic Day
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The academic challenge and promise of your Seattle U education begins today. This is, as it were, your first day of class. It's just that we brought all of you together, all students and all professors, into one large class and put up a tent in order to hold all of you. The main content of the class will be on “Equity and Diversity for a Just and Humane World – Community, Youth, and Justice”, which links with your discussion afterward in groups of Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America.

Before we get to the subject of today's first class, I have been asked to say something about the whole of your Jesuit education at this university. What is important about it and what, especially, is important for you as new students.

I learned recently of a dean of students who welcomes the new students of his college the very first time they gather in the following way:

“You have won the prize. You have the opportunity, at a key transition point, to reimagine your life.”

You have won the prize. You have threaded your way over the past years through the maze of college visits, tests, college applications, essays, acceptances, discussions with family and friends, financial negotiations, the choice of Seattle University as your university, summer orientation, waiting while friends have already gone off to college, coming, moving in, saying goodbye to family, and here you are on your first day of class. You have won the prize, the prize you sought.

At a key transition point. I don't need to stress that; you know it; you feel it. All of your education before, all of the Septembers of your life, have had a continuity of place, dimension, family, town or city, a connection of one year to the next to the next, with gradual increasing of academic content and difficulty. But great continuity. Then, though long prepared for, abruptly you find yourself with these new classmates from all over the country and the world, together in this new city, on this campus, and with these professors. I think every single one of you knows today, feels, experiences, that you are indeed at a key transition point.

You have the opportunity to reimagine your life. This is the point I would like to reflect on today, by way of introduction on my part, to your education ahead, not just today, or this quarter, or this year, but the whole of it. So it's an open-ended multi-year assignment. The opportunity begins now and it is important that it begins now and that

you begin to do it, but you have plenty of time to bring it to fulfillment. The assignment is “reimagine your life”.

The dean speaking on the first day to the new students at that other college adds, “reprogram yourself”... but I don’t. That is too close for me and for us to “reinvent yourself”. No, we trust in who you are, we respect the way you have shaped yourself, we honor with you how your family has helped you to be who you are. You have an unrepeatable history, experience of being loved, a spirituality or faith, a mind and heart and body which click or hum or purr in a certain way. So no, we do not say “reprogram yourself” because that comes too close for us and what we do in education to saying “reinvent yourself”. We take you as you are. We do so with respect and gratitude, with definite ideas and responsibilities to challenge, stretch, and lead you to learn, but always accepting what God, and family, and time, and friends and you have created, have invented. What our education asks you to do is not to reinvent yourself but to reimagine your life.

When I say “reimagine your life” I mean something much more and quite different from reimagine what you are going to do in your life. When I was 18 I imagined that I was going to be a dogsled priest in Northern Alaska mushing my team of Malamutes across a frozen tundra under the Aurora Borealis to bring the Catholic sacraments to an isolated Eskimo village. Barack Obama, when he was 18, referring to himself as “Barry” from embarrassment about his weird “Barack” name, imagined that he was going to be a basketball player. Probably what you imagine you are going to do in your life is just as far off the mark as what Barack and I thought. So, when we say today “you have the opportunity, at a key transition point, to reimagine your life”, we mean something other, something more than simply what you are going to do, or the parallel question, “What will your major be?”

A Jesuit education is an education of depth of thought and imagination. Depth of thought, depth of imagination, and depth of both thought and imagination together; where thought calls for imagination and imagination calls for thought, and each deepens and expands the other. There is a danger today of a permeating superficiality, of knowing everything thinly, of connecting widely but weakly, of taking in too much but thinking too little, of being filled with images and fantasies but imagining life shallowly and unconnected with what is real.

The international head of the Jesuits, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, recently put it this way about Jesuit education:

“The globalization of superficiality challenges Jesuit education to promote in creative ways the depths of thought and imagination that are distinguishing marks of (our) Ignatian tradition... But it is essential to understand that imagination is not the same as fantasy. Fantasy is a flight from reality, to a world where we create images for the sake of a diversity of images. Imagination grasps reality... in Jesuit education, the depth of learning and imagination encompasses and integrates intellectual rigor with reflection on the experience of reality together

with creative imagination to work toward constructing a more humane, just, sustainable, and faith-filled world.”

I think every course of every professor offered at Seattle University not only has depth of thought but also requires and promotes depth of imagination. All of our education helps you to reimagine your life. Again this does not mean first of all reimagining your future life in the sense of what you will do. Rather it means reimagining your life and life itself in the sense of your moral imagination, your political imagination, your social imagination, your American imagination, your scientific and mathematical imagination, your community imagination, your artistic imagination, your spiritual and religious imagination, your imagination of service, your economic imagination, your imagination of health and wellness, your environmental imagination, your imagination of yourself, your community and city, your world, and your God.

Imagination grasps reality when opened up by depth of thought. Depth of thought and depth of imagination spurring one another on, opening one another up, grasp reality, grasp life. This is what we mean when we say, “You have the opportunity, at a key point of transition, to reimagine your life.”

This does require that you let something very new in, let it in from the tributaries of all your studies. Learn to reimagine your life by learning to imagine through history, science, philosophy, psychology, economics, theology, art, anthropology, communication, literature, poetry, and mathematics.

Train yourself to reimagine life. Let thought take you there, but let imagination create the new and grasp the real. It also means that you allow how you now imagine life, imagine your life, to be held in suspension, held open rather than closed, ready, expectant for the new, willing to deepen, to consider the other, to change. Probably how you now imagine your life is not really your way of doing it based on who you are, but is American culture imagining your life for you and instead of you. You don't really want that, do you?!

I am confident that you are in very good hands in the courses and dialogues, advising, and explorations with your professors. They are professors because their profession is to think and know deeply, to imagine fully and passionately, and to guide you into your own depth of knowledge and imagination, into the grasp of the real. I am also confident, because you chose this kind of education, that they will find in you persons truly open to depth of thought and imagination. You are both very fortunate.

Let's now get on with the program for today, on this first day of class, through depth of thought and imagination with the exciting opportunity of reimagining our life. Let's begin reimagining our life today!