

November 2021

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Recommended Citation

Fosse, Christo V. and Smythe, Kathleen R. (2021) "Educating for a Hope-Filled Future," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 10: No. 2, Article 12.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol10/iss2/12>

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Educating for a Hope-Filled Future

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Abstract

A student and teacher reflect on how a course on political narrative that incorporated Tai Chi at the beginning promoted a sense of interconnectedness. This interconnectedness made the hard and complex work for a more sustainable future more accessible.

Christo V. Fosse (CF): In our current times, carrying hope as a college student can feel naive, if not useless. Facing a world rife with inequality and injustice, it often seems that systemic issues run so deep that no matter how knowledgeable and informed I become on a topic, the same injustices will continue to persist. I know I am not alone in feeling this way.

Last year, that similar feeling pestered me during a particular course. For two weeks, our class analyzed the urban-rural divide in the United States, a critical yet often overlooked issue. We learned that, despite technological advancements, the gap between the core and periphery continues to grow, with urban counties accounting for most population, wage, and job growth. Worse, commentators have virtually deemed the divide to be unsalvageable. While Googling, I came across an *Axios* article entitled, “The Rural America Death Spiral.”¹

Where, in previous courses, that feeling of suffocation and despair would have lingered, in this class, I felt something different—a feeling that I had previously deemed overly “optimistic” and “naive.” This time, I felt a sense of hope. It was not necessarily a blind faith that the urban-rural divide would eventually heal, but rather the trust that comes with knowing we have already developed practices and narratives that can advance new systems and approaches. Using sustainability as a lens, introduced by my professor

Dr. Kathleen Smythe, I realized how a politically divisive topic could also bring about unification between urban and rural America, reducing disparities that have continued to grow since the 2016 presidential election. By becoming more integrated with nature, landscapes, and our local affairs, communities can become more self-reliant and, in turn, embrace a sense of resilience that is critical for prosperity.

Why is this important? Many of the tensions between urban and rural communities stem from the same feelings that seem to afflict all humans in times of despair: specifically, a sense of helplessness and a lack of agency. Our urban centers, as of now, rarely rely on themselves for critical resources, whether that means food, labor, or energy. Rather than develop those resources closer to home with all the attendant consequences of pollution and environmental degradation, we look for them in areas sometimes hundreds of miles away, where land seems more profitable and cheaper. Doing this, however, inevitably promotes resentment from such areas of extraction. While rural citizens strive to produce essential goods such as food and energy, they perceive—from users in the cities—a lack of reverence and respect for the work they perform.² This perception is heightened by their worsening living conditions, even as the country continues to reap the benefits of their hard work.

Sustainability offers a solution. Returning to locality—finding ways urban *and* rural areas can produce life-giving sources that sustain themselves—can reduce these imbalanced relationships and develop a new, more independent way of living. By following this narrative, we can revitalize communities and construct them in such a manner that they consist of “neighbors who cherish and protect what they have in common.”³

Kathleen R. Smythe (KS): Christo, to my great delight, left my course with hope. In Fall 2020 in HIST 300: Writing in Public, I set up the task of learning about the role of narrative in local, state, national, and international politics, with the goal of promoting agency for students who find themselves in a world they did not create. The dominant culture encourages narcissism and withdrawal from civic engagement in the face of grave challenges. But we all know that is a path to depression and ill health.

I believe that finding a way to give students the opportunity to hear narratives of hope and action within their own communities and beyond is important. Then encouraging them to find their voice and a platform to articulate their own narratives is one successful way of doing so. The key is to step out of the narrow confines of our own disciplines, course material, and communities to help students and ourselves find the grand narratives of ecological healing, global community, and the health of diversity that can and should be applied everywhere.

I did this in the course in a number of ways. First, we spent time at the beginning of class learning the movements of peace in Tai Chi so that they were clearly linking their bodies and minds and linking all of our bodies together in this synchronized movement. And then I required them to read broadly and deeply (literature, political theory, papal encyclicals) about the crucial role of narrative in politics.

CF: By re-integrating the mind and body in the learning process, Dr. Smythe’s course helped me understand how to move toward a hope-filled future and care for our common home. One way our class did this was through the movements of peace. Standing in a circle, the class engaged in

deep breathing, focusing on our inner stillness and humanity. Then we started. Practicing the movements provided an opportunity, albeit brief, to escape the “busyness” of life and pay attention to our physical existence—an act we performed throughout the semester, even after the pandemic ushered in the transition to online learning. Such a practice mentally prepared students and faculty for the day’s lesson and conversation, paving the way for a productive and reflection session.

More than just a relaxation technique, however, performing Tai Chi helped me realize a basic, yet critical, idea: our bodies occupy space in this shared world we inhabit. Something as simple as that, although seemingly trivial, was crucial in teaching me to understand the interconnectedness—to Earth, society, and self—that defines our lives. To physically exist in this world necessitates the acknowledgement that we constantly interact with our surroundings.

Unfortunately, most of society fails to recognize this interconnectedness. This failure makes it difficult to see the implications of our actions and how we may perpetuate global and national crises. In his second encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis writes, “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth; our bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.”⁴ In this forgotten space, a dangerous environmental crisis has taken root, posing a threat to those fundamental interconnections that shape humanity and creating a reality where despair runs high.

By incorporating the movements of peace into class instruction, I began to notice the deeper importance of a course that, at face value, focused on political narratives and how they relate to larger ideas, whether that means economic philosophies or sustainability. Just concentrating on the act of being present illuminated that these lessons were not only investigations of ideas and crises, but investigations of who we are as humans and our purpose. Because of this realization, the environmental crisis turned from something that afflicts nature and “other” countries to something that directly attacks our humanity. Climate change transformed into a crisis that we, as students and educators, have an obligation to fix.

KS: Music to my ears. We are fighting a crisis of humanity as much as a crisis of lack of sustainability. All of the choices I made in the course, regarding readings and activities, were grounded in the [Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability \(IPS\)](#).⁵ I sought to be open and vulnerable with students (IPS theme 1) about both the challenges we face but also the capacity each of us possesses to be part of the solution. I also taught them movements of peace from my Tai Chi class. Doing so feels risky for I worry that students will think I am crazy, or that my co-instructor will think I am wasting class time. But Tai Chi is a way of both learning bodily (theme 2) and taking time to pause (theme 3), and I was explicit in the syllabus and in class that I thought both were essential to their educational success and to their quest to be engaged citizens.

HIST 300 was paired with a course in public policy where students investigated a public policy issue of their choosing, seeking to move it one step down the road in terms of public awareness, support from the electorate, etc. This was an excellent way to get students to take an action; learn that systemic change is an incremental process; and that success is not measured by a final product but by building relationships, skills and awareness (theme 4). Finally, there were four different guest speakers in the class, two from Cincinnati and two from other countries, all discussing the myriad ways in which sustainability policy is both politically feasible and popular. For all of us, these presentations made sustainability more accessible and complex (theme 5).

The themes also revealed that popular notions about sustainability differ from the kinds of decisions that citizens and politicians are making. Recycling is the tip of the iceberg. Nations are planting trees, turning waste into energy, using carbon credits, and promoting mass transit, etc. The link with the more recent [Universal Apostolic Preferences](#) was also clear: educating youth for a hope-filled future must include caring for our common home. While these are words from the Society of Jesus, they are words for rescuing humanity.

The goal of the course was to give students the courage and power to craft their own narratives

for the future. What policy? What candidate? What values did they most believe in and want to fight for? At its foundation, the IPS is a formula for engagement, for digging in, reconnecting and being part of the solution. And we both think that these are essential elements of educating for a hope-filled future, of seeing sustainability as a call for human and ecological welfare at once.

CF: Such a path as we took in this course reinforces and emphasizes the Jesuit call to “care for the whole person”—or *cura personalis*. By looking outside our communities, interests, and comfort zones, we expose ourselves to new perspectives and beliefs that enrich our own understanding of the world and how to improve it. The potential for a hope-filled future depends on a deep and informed understanding of the global community and the possibilities its differences offer. Gathering this information better defines who we are as humans and our capabilities.

However, learning these perspectives does not necessarily always inspire hope, and this is the challenge that educators and students must overcome. As much as course material can bring about hope, it can equally bring about despair. Our current challenges—climate change, inequality, and systemic racism—exemplify this predicament, demonstrating just how easy it is to retreat from the issue rather than confront it. Mother Teresa put it best when she said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”⁶ Given this, how can we encourage students, in the face of devastation, to move forward with some sense of idealism and purpose?

Finding that balance—being honest about the realities without injecting a sense of paralysis—is difficult. Yet, as George Monbiot explains, part of the challenge that lies in fostering new solutions is simply understanding how bad practices fail us. Concerning our current individualistic period, he writes, “this crisis is self-generating. The pursuit of material satisfactions dulls our concern for other people and for the living planet. It blinds us to our place in the world and the damage we impose on others.”⁷


Seeing the specific ramifications allows students to craft stories that avoid such perils, and a holistic, global education shows that these stories are, in fact, possible. For example, Bhutan, an Asian country located in the Eastern Himalayas, has committed to moving away from traditional economic metrics (such as GDP) in favor of a more progressive measurement, Gross National Happiness (GNH). Bhutan's choice to value emotional well-being over monetary accumulation demonstrates that even the most seemingly developed, entrenched narratives can be challenged. And the results are illuminating: Bhutan's unique metric has integrated national culture and Buddhist principles to develop a comprehensive narrative that addresses the very concern Mother Teresa raised.⁸

KS: The need for realism and hope, as Christomentions, is a challenge but is easier to achieve with a broader lens and/or a deeper one. I have already discussed the interdisciplinary nature of the course. It also had a global element. Students met a Swede and a Kenyan via Zoom who are engaged in sustainability efforts in both countries. They also met local officials who were doing similar work in Cincinnati. All this work—individual, national, institutional—demonstrates to students how they can become stewards of the Earth and that their work is part of a much larger picture of stewardship work.

CF: That's a powerful possibility, especially for students—like myself—who often feel powerless in the face of dominant structures and narratives. Reclaiming that sense of empowerment, however, first requires developing some sort of agency, and we can trace that sentiment within the Jesuit emphasis on caring for our common home. (Or, as Dr. Smythe eloquently put it, becoming “stewards of the Earth”). Why, specifically, the Earth? As the Preferences demonstrate, the environment is more than just the place we inhabit. It is “Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God,” the setting in which we live for *and* with others.⁹ When we contribute to environmental degradation, we degrade our relationships, fostering sentiments of withdrawal and isolation not suitable for the necessary changes our society so desperately needs. What a narrative rooted in sustainability offers are not only tangible ways we can act—recycling, buying eco-friendly products,

reducing energy consumption, etc.—but ways that we can generate agency and, as Pope Francis writes, “dream...as a single human family” in which we are “brothers and sisters all.”¹⁰ Becoming stewards of the Earth entails studying the root causes of global issues and then actively collaborating with others to develop solutions, stories that we can inhabit.

All too often our education system neglects that second step, only communicating the vast challenges we face. I've taken many courses where, after analyzing and assessing the issue, we simply “move on” to the next one, without addressing the work that committed individuals and organizations have already invested to sponsor change. In Dr. Smythe's course, yes, we fully understood the issues that our disconnected, unequal economy has fostered. But we also understood the work of other countries, such as Rwanda and Sweden, that are reaping the benefits of a greener, more “just” economy. She also highlighted individuals and organizations in the Cincinnati community that advocated for similar adjustments.

And by doing that, I left the course not only feeling energized and renewed, but hopeful and confident, secure in the knowledge that these challenges—while large and daunting—are not festering without any resistance. I could picture myself as the solution, collaborating with agencies and individuals in a way not too different than what Pope Francis indicated above. By re-integrating mind and body, familiarizing ourselves with local and foreign officials, and taking action, we learned the true nature of stewardship. Stewardship demands that, besides becoming informed, we approach issues by upholding the interconnections and complexities that lie at their core, starting with our own body-mind interconnections. 

Notes

¹ Juliet Bartz and Stef W. Kight, "The Rural America Death Spiral," *Axios*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/the-rural-america-death-spiral-7c177126-638f-4270-8987-59ab8bf76faa.html>.

² Eliza Griswold, *Amity and Prosperity: One Family and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 72.

³ Wendell Berry, "The Idea of a Local Economy," *Orion Magazine*, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-idea-of-a-local-economy/>.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), sec. 2.

⁵ James L. Leighter and Kathleen R. Smythe, "Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability: An Overview," *Jesuit Higher*

Education: A Journal 8, no. 1 (2019), <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol8/iss1/3>.

⁶ "Mother Teresa Reflects on Working Toward Peace," Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (Santa Clara University), accessed July 30, 2020, <https://legacy.scu.edu/ethics/architects-of-peace/Teresa/essay.html>.

⁷ George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso Books, 2018), 19.

⁸ Susan M. Walcott, "One of a Kind: Bhutan and the Modernity Challenge," *National Identities* 13, no. 3 (September 2011): 254-255.

⁹ The Society of Jesus, "Universal Apostolic Preferences," accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/>.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020), sec. 8.