

## **The Life of the Mind in the Year of the City**

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When I was growing up, a kid in New York City, I used to wander the streets of Manhattan with a book in my hand, reading, reading, reading. It's a wonder I wasn't run over by a passing car. I suppose it's *not* a wonder that I stand before you today a philosopher and an academic. Such a profession has long been known for its dedication to the life of the mind, but also its disconnection from the "real world." Perhaps this reputation is well-deserved. The first practitioner of western philosophy and natural science, Thales of Miletus, was said to have fallen into a well one night while gazing up at the stars. A passing maidservant from Thrace scoffed at him for being so absorbed in the skies he couldn't see what plainly lay at his feet (Plato's *Theaetetus*, 174a). I must admit I still fit the caricature of the absent-minded professor. Absorbed in thought, I can be a danger to myself or others.

This is sometimes how we think about the "life of the mind," the topic that all those who receive the Nachbahr award are challenged to address. To even speak of the "life of the mind" is implicitly to contrast this with other life-forms. What might they be? Socrates distinguished those who lived according to "*philo-sophia*," the love of wisdom, from the greater mass of people who are lovers of the body, desiring sensual pleasure and material wealth (Plato's *Phaedo* 64-69). The life of the mind can also be contrasted with a life of the heart. Romantics rejected sterile intellectualism for a vibrant, throbbing relationship with the natural world, with human lovers, and with one's own intuitive genius.

Regardless of what it is distinguished from, the "life of the mind" sounds somehow partial and disconnected. When parents sense their sons and daughters are being seduced by the life of the mind they may be tempted to warn off their children, lest like Thales they fall into a

well. “Be practical. Pick a useful major, not something like philosophy. Develop your marketable skills.” That is, don’t become so enamored of the heavens that you lose sight of the real world around you.

From this perspective it’s hard to make sense of the title of my talk, “The Life of the Mind in the Year of the City.” It seems almost like an oxymoron. Doesn’t the life of the mind pull you away from the bustle, the practicality, the grit, and social problems that characterize city-life? Not necessarily. This is not the view of Father Linnane who, to his credit, proclaimed this Loyola’s “Year of the City.” Credit is also due to the many students, professors, staff and administrators working hard to give that idea flesh and blood. No one would be more pleased than the man for whom the Nachbahr Award is named, Bernard Nachbahr. He was a lovely person, a beloved professor and colleague, and a philosopher deeply engaged with the good of the community and the pursuit of social justice. In fact, he helped start the Peace and Justice Series, and was the first director of the Center for the Humanities at Loyola, over two decades ago.

But what does the “life of the mind” have to do with such matters? This became clearer to me when I stepped out of the “Loyola bubble” to teach a course in 1992 at the Maryland Penitentiary. The oldest continuously operating penitentiary in the Western world, it is situated in downtown Baltimore less than a mile from the Washington Monument on Charles Street. At the time it served as the men’s maximum security prison for all of the state of Maryland. I volunteered to teach a college-level seminar in philosophy that attracted some of the most motivated men from the inmate population. We began by studying the theme of imprisonment and freedom, reading about Socrates’ trial, the stoicism of Epictetus, a crippled Roman slave, and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, clarion call for justice in his letter from Birmingham Jail. Most of

the inmates were serving life-sentences. They weren't going anywhere so neither was I. The class continued over two years, a luxury you don't have at a place like Loyola.

There was also a need, a passion, you don't always see at a place like Loyola. We are used to taking for granted the life of the mind. To study history, literature, philosophy, theology, and on and on, ho-hum. It can seem not a privilege to be deeply valued, and a tool of personal liberation, but almost a prison sentence to be served. Four years of hard labor on the core curriculum and major until release is finally won in the form of a diploma.

How very different was the attitude of the inmates! For them the life of the mind *was* their release. Even while under severe bodily confinement, the spirit could take flight, soaring and sweeping through the heavens. The great minds of every historical period, every culture, every faith, lay open through the pages of the books we studied, probed, interpreted, and argued about under the watchful gaze of the prison guards.

Dwelling in a world of ideas, the inmates were better able to disconnect from the harshness around them – the bars and barbed wire of a maximum security prison. But finally, our work was not primarily about *disconnecting*, but *reconnecting*. The inmates needed to reconnect with all those things within themselves that life in the inner city, and in prison, had obscured. Who am I, beyond my identity as a drug dealer, a criminal, a tough guy? What happened to that innocent child I once was – is he still in there somewhere, and dare I let him out? Is there any sense in which he still deserves to be loved? What is life all about now that I'm serving a life sentence? What went wrong in my past? How can my future be different? How do I cope with the present, waking up each morning to a life in hell or, if I'm lucky, purgatory? How can I be useful? How can I be happy? How can I control my inner demons and contact my inner angels?

Such questions were not merely intellectual (though intellectual they were). Your very life was riding on the answers adopted – your emotional, social, and spiritual life, and on the streets, and in prison, sometimes your physical life. But isn't that true for all of us? Whose life does not ride on the answers we adopt concerning the meaning and proper goals of life? These prisoners were just more in touch with that fact.

Our class conversations proved so powerful that I began to tape and transcribe them, and they formed the basis for a book, *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

On the day I learned that I was to give this talk I received a letter from Donald Thompson, Sr., one of the participants in that project. We've now known each other for fourteen years. Permit me to quote extensively from his letter so you are not just hearing my voice today but that of an inmate, a voice that manages to escape bars and guards and circulate among us in freedom. Donald writes:

As I am wont, I commence this missive by evoking the peace and blessing of God on both you and your entire family. I, myself am well despite my present plight. God is good. Out of that goodness he has blessed me with the mental and spiritual fortitude to cope; however, when I do have my moments of pain, I remember that the grave-yards are teeming with folks who would gladly have this cell and all the time too.

To be honest, most of my depression derives from thinking about the victim in my case. Sometimes I just do not feel worthy of God's grace because I took that man's life. Long ago I went to God and begged for forgiveness: and he blessed me. Yet I have been unable to forgive myself....I truly appreciate you affording me a nonjudgmental shoulder on which to lean....

We are at present under a lock-down because two officers were stabbed two weeks ago. It is very unfortunate that these officers were injured. My heart goes out to them and their respective families, for I do not condone violence. I am, nonetheless, not tripping off about the lock-down. It gave birth to this mail you are perusing. Plus, it forced me to meditate, rest, and reflect. So I have embraced this situation. I would be blessed if I could somehow incorporate that philosophy in other aspects of my life.

When I went to God – twenty two years ago – for grace, I made a covenant to not perpetrate violence again. The fact that I have been able to honor that commitment is not mere hocus pocus....The thing that deterred me from violence was a structured environment which was comprised of social programs, therapeutic programs, educational programs, and the like. These institutions armed me with the empowering information I needed to honor my covenant. I was also able to network and bond with folks such as you. And you my friend have played an integral role in my edification. This is what we need now to curb violence in and outside the walls. That is, institutions that educate, socialize and heal. In addition we need ordinary people to *attach* themselves to these structured environments. No gang-banger can withstand this transformation juggernaut. Drew, I do not know how many acts of violence I have prevented by employing the information I gleaned from these programs and folks like you....Many of these programs no longer exist.

Donald's right: he's experienced an inward transformation assisted by outward supports. He's also right in his last statement: many of the programs to which he refers no longer exist. Shortly after our course together, a federal anti-crime bill closed down college extension programs in

prisons around the country. The bill rendered inmates ineligible for Pell Grants, the funds that assist low-income Americans to pay for higher education. To me, this is not an anti-crime bill, but pro-crime in its effects. Our get-tough-on-the-criminal politics has led us to turn away from the very concept of rehabilitation. Instead, we stuff the prisons ever fuller with what we regard as unredeemable social refuse. America now locks up over 2.2 million inmates, some 63% of whom are Hispanic or black. We hold fully one-fourth of the entire world's prison population, jailing people at six to eight times the rate of comparable Western countries. For example, we hold more prisoners in a single *state*, the state of Texas, than do the *nations* of France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and Singapore all combined.

We conduct this under the aegis of the Department of Corrections, but do we truly seek to correct? We lock people in penitentiaries, but do we work to assist them in a penitential process of self-reflection and change? Socrates might ask such annoying questions because he was interested in our language. This wasn't to him an intellectual game. He believed if we think deeply about our words, especially those of moral significance, and the ideals they represent, we may better structure our lives and society in accord with them. Otherwise we wander blind. We try to correct but do so incorrectly.

Currently, when inmates emerge from the correctional system, often undereducated, embittered, and now with the label of "ex-con" to make things even harder, they frequently revert to criminal behavior and re-incarceration. This recidivism rate, however, is significantly reduced for prisoners with higher education. Donald spoke of the "transformation juggernaut" that "no gang-banger can withstand." The life of the mind can be that powerful. It can take the gun right out of a man's hand and put words, instead, in his mouth.

But what does this finally have to do with you or me? After all, we're not prisoners. Or are we? Depends what you mean by prison, Socrates might say, annoying as ever. Speaking for myself, I know what it's like to struggle with inner prisons of fear and neurosis. I can be imprisoned by materialism and sensation addiction, fed by a voracious and often vacuous culture of competition, consumerism, and endless commercials. Politically, I can be imprisoned by a stereotype, an unreasoned and uninformed presumption about someone different than myself. We can be imprisoned by our parents' expectations, or our peers, or information controlled by corporate media. When will we realize the opinions we held, the very life we led, was not necessarily our own? Hopefully, before we're on our deathbed.

The life of the mind can be our liberator. It can help us discover if, and when, and how, we're in prison. That itself is a big step toward freedom. The life of the mind can also help us reduce our own recidivism rate – that is, our tendency to relapse back into old habits. “The unexamined life,” Socrates said, “is not worth living” (Plato's *Apology 38a*). He kept examining and re-examining things to his delight, but not always to that of those around him. Ultimately the men of Athens gave him over to their department of corrections. That is, they threw him in prison and made him drink poison. The life of the mind had led Socrates to challenge his city, a city that he deeply loved.

Do we dare challenge ourselves, and challenge our city, our country, when it behaves in ways irrational and immoral? If so, Socrates would be pleased. Right now we are debating weighty matters, or should be. Is it consonant with our values to hold people without trial or right of appeal; to engage in unrestrained secret surveillance; to use torture as an official policy of the state? Is this how we best preserve our freedoms? For Socrates, the life of the mind is one of challenge, personal, but also political – that is, pertaining to the *polis* – the Greek word for

city-state.

The life of the mind not only assists the *polis* but arises from within it. Thought and learning happen best in communities. We see this in Loyola classrooms where questions of meaning and justice are debated. We also see this when students go off-campus into greater Baltimore to help others in developing their minds and lives. Each week students tutor at St. Ambrose's after-school program, or work with adult learners at the Caroline Center and Learning Bank, or participate in so many other forms of service, as do faculty, staff and administrators. Then there is Loyola's growing number of service-learning courses where theory and practice, service and reflection, enhance one another. It's hard to appreciate the life of the mind unless you're applying it in the world and actively passing it on to others.

In such situations who is the teacher and who the learner? For Socrates the very distinction fell away. He sought dialogue partners, not students. For him, the life of the mind was never a solitary thing but the act of a community seeking to discover and live according to its highest ideals. My talk is entitled "The Life of the Mind in the Year of the City." "But of course," Socrates might say. "Where else, what else, could the life of the mind be?"