

Given Our Promise and Purposes, How Can We Respond To The Changing Complexities Of Laying The Foundation For Engaging Future Generations Of Students And Educators?

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I. A New World Calling for a New Image

The “foundation” is a well-rehearsed image. We often employ it to describe some conceptual support, an undergirding substance, a unifying basis for development. It gives communities the confidence to build upward, to develop, to innovate. The foundation is the portal from the established to the possible, the point of contact between the actual and the potential. It is an appealing image for thinking about the future of Marianist education because it conveys a fundamental stability, cohesion, an orientation behind all that we do and are. It helps to ensure that future generations of students and educators find themselves on established, solid grounding. It gives us a certain comfort of security. We feel assured that our institutions will endure thanks to the foundations we preserve.

But the various crises described this week seem to suggest that our world is resisting just this image of the foundation. Our current world is increasingly unstable, incoherent, lacking in orientation. Elements of *every* established foundation – institutional and social – are being called into question, rightly so, and often after too long. In response, many adopt a posture antithetical to a “staticism” that the image of foundation might imply. This is certainly not a new phenomenon. Every generation both wrestles with destabilizing forces and induces destabilization in its own way. Indeed, we are all heirs to one man’s destabilizing response to destabilization. But this time it hits different.

This brings me to wonder if now is the time to ask whether our new reality calls for a new image other than “foundation.” In many ways, I think that this search has quietly animated this Symposium.

Our current world reminds me of being on the ocean, being very much adrift. My family has always been an ocean-gathering family. Some gather on the seashore, others gather from the deep sea. It is a place of constant flux, of movement, of change. To thrive on the water requires an openness to that moment’s specific conditions. One learns quickly that, when adrift somewhere between Kaua’i and Ni’ihau in less-than-ideal conditions on a 30’ fiberglass boat, it is the sea and not me calling the shots.

Being adrift is as far opposed from foundations as one might get. One might yearn for stability, cohesion, and orientation. But the open water is a relentless denier. Thanks to my family’s open boat policy, I was able to spend time on the water with many different people: fellow gatherers, tourists on charter, land dwellers, sight seers, sport fishers, the curious – an endless cavalcade of those looking for adventure. Over time I observed that those demanding the satisfaction of stability on

the sea were often the first to get seasick, to feel fatigue, to become panicked. I've wondered if this is true for other areas of life. Is it that those expecting the world of foundations from the world adrift are the first to get seasick, to feel fatigue, to become panicked?

In what follows, I would like to quickly sketch a very modest post-foundational image – something gleaned from being adrift, free from the desire for foundations which would cause discomfort. I hope to share that this need not imply the nihilism which accompanied one's being adrift the 20th century. Rather, I'd like to suggest that our "adriftedness" represents an invitation to return to what is essential to Marianist education. But first, another story from the geo-cultural settings of the broader Pacific.

II. Mau: Wayfaring in New Hemispheres

It was posited in the mid 20th century that Polynesia had been inadvertently settled by those adrift from South America. Among evidence for eastward movement were artifacts found in Polynesia seemingly identical to those found in the former Inca empire. Led by this hypothesis, a team of Scandinavian explorers began their drift from Peru on their balsa raft, the *Kon-Tiki*.

After 4,300 miles, pushed by the winds and the Humboldt current, the crew landed at the Tuamotu Islands. They had demonstrated to their satisfaction that Polynesian settlement did not occur otherwise.

Separate excavations in the far western Pacific *did indeed* suggest otherwise – that groups migrating away from the Asian continent were capable of intentionally settling Polynesia. Tales of these epic voyages had even been preserved by oral tradition. With the benefit of science, we now know that this position is not plausible but provable. As successive generations settled throughout Polynesia, knowledge of transpacific navigation and the long-range craft which made the journeys possible disappeared, a bittersweet testament to their success.

In the early 1970's, a group of young Native Hawaiians attempted recreate these voyages. Absent extant original craft, they designed a canoe borrowing elements from Polynesian cultures and observations by James Cook: twin hulls, two masts, and crab-claw sails. This sixty-foot 'performance equivalent' was intended to test the capabilities of a canoe on an ancient voyage between Hawai'i and Tahiti.

Finding a Polynesian navigator for the voyage proved impossible. On the Micronesian island of Satawal, they ultimately located a traditional navigator named Mau. Mau possessed knowledge of navigational system based on wave patterns, currents, relationships between islands, but the system was especially reliant on key navigational stars. But before he could navigate between Hawai'i and Tahiti, Mau had to quickly learn a new ocean, a new position of the sun, a new sky, a new route, a new craft, and forge a new relationship with crew unfamiliar with the Satawalese system. In June of 1976, Mau successfully navigated the voyaging canoe *Hōkūle'a*, from Hawai'i to Tahiti.

Beyond proving that Polynesians *intentionally* sailed between archipelagos – they were not just pushed about the Pacific – *Hōkūleʻa* was and is an important part of recovering a sense of Hawaiian self-determination following the American overthrow of our monarchy. Today *Hōkūleʻa* continues its mission of celebrating indigenous knowledge and craft guided by a navigational method inspired by Mau’s knowledge, combined with Native Hawaiian elements.

My brief retelling of this story aims not to celebrate what Mau was able to *do*, but to highlight the kind of person he *was*. Given a new sky and conditions, he was able to adapt to a new setting, to set new goals, to be guided by new points of reference. He did so in a literally fluid setting – indeed, adrift, free of foundations. Given our context and theme, and in light of my preceding comments, his example might encourage us to consider an *agent-forming* approach rather than an *institution-building* approach. This focus is not on laying more sophisticated foundations for our institutions, but on ensuring that every student and educator possesses a set of capabilities partially constitutive of embodying the ends of Marianist education well. Absent Santeria and a crystal ball, our current world has shown us that we don’t know where the next swell will come from, whether the clouds on the horizon will materialize into a storm, or how high the winds will stand the waves.

Perhaps we have found no *new fulcrum* suitable for a generation adrift. Perhaps we are instead to cultivate beholders of stars finding their own way over the depths of crisis.

III. From Foundation Builders to Constellation Beholders

As we traverse our changing sea, what are our stars? It seems to me that these focal points in our night sky are of at least three types: exemplars, principles, and values. I’d like to give a brief example of each.

An exemplar. Perhaps our clearest and most visible exemplar is Mary, the star of the sea. In the Magnificat, she bursts into a song of joyful thanksgiving as she reflects on her special role in God’s re-establishment of more just relationships. We celebrate her first “yes” to this mission in a special way with our own “yeses” as commence our work for the transformation of our institutions and of our society.

A principle. Ever-present on our campuses is the preferential option for the poor. In a letter of 1839, Fr. Chaminade counsels, “Do whatever he tells you, and in this view, we embrace the work of the Christian education of youth, and especially of the poor, the work of the arts and trades, the work of Sodalties, of retreats and of missions.” Something that I had always admired about Marianist educators when I was a student is how they responded to Chaminade’s call by placing the marginalized at the center of their work.

A value. On our campus, we are proud to “exhibit a strong social consciousness that expressly permeates all curricula.” This is expressed directly to our students through the development and by promotion of “programs of service designed to spark a

passion for justice.” Our broader community often takes note of the indigenous conscientization made possible through Native-Hawaiian empowering initiatives and partnerships.

Now, out of a set of stars – exemplars, principles, and values – constellations are formed. It is likely that you connected the dots between Mary, the preferential option for the poor, and strong social consciousness and recognized one of the characteristics of a Marianist education: *Educate for Service, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. Each one of our characteristic-constellations contains an array of exemplar-stars, principle-stars, and value-stars. I, for one, often mistake the constellation for a single star. It’s in situations like these that we might take a closer look and appreciate connections wisely and lovingly made.

The imaginative task of constructing such constellations animated by our Marianist heritage is our unique responsibility. We can claim no monopoly on Mary, nor on the preferential option for the poor, nor on our commitment to socially conscious curricula. There are many other institutions that draw upon these stars in the construction of their own constellations. But how and why we do so is what is distinctive of our work as Marianist educators.

It is here in the formation of our Marianist constellations that we see the logic of the *Sodality* at work: exemplars, principles, and values in carefully crafted community for the purpose of reorienting society on a path to greater justice. We form these constellations not as art but as guiding and common points of reference for our mission and identity. In a post- foundational world – in a world adrift – we could and must rely on our constellations now more than ever.

In view of our promise and purposes – of forming guiding constellations toward that end -- it seems to me that a comprehensive knowledge of our night sky might be one of our first burdens as Marianist educators.

The theme of the 2006 MUM was the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. I attended as an undergraduate. A response to the day’s presentations was delivered by Fr. Jim Heft, a masterful pinch hitter for the late Monika Hellwig. I remember him saying slowly, carefully, but softly: “we tend to do *Marianist* well. *Catholic* – not as well.” I’ve never forgotten that. I think about that a lot. I wonder if he still feels the same.

Back then it was as if Marianist was the sweet frosting on the cake. Some only eat the frosting. But rather than a two-layer cake, it seems like some now in our broader culture might see Catholic and Marianist more akin to oil and water. This is very understandably and very regrettably so. But it seems to me that the oil/water dynamic is an opportunity to bring Catholic and Marianist into a closer bond than ever if we can act as emulsifying agents. (A “*marianaise*,” if you will.)

All this to say: sometimes the darkest part of our sky is the Catholic corner. In recalling much of our conversations over this past week, it’s plain to see that Service, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation suffuses so much of what we do. We tend to do *that* well. *Other* parts of our tradition – not as well.

The Catholic corner is not the only dark patch, to be sure. But which stars are

absent from the constellations we craft? Why are they absent? Or why do we *refuse* to see them? Given our promise and purposes, we might do well to remember that more complete constellations mean more coherent points of reference. This all begins with knowledge of our night sky, from *horizon to horizon*.

Then, the image suggests, we will be better positioned to perform our special role of guiding and forming our students and colleagues as imaginative beholders. Discerning what that process of formation might be, along with what those constellations will contain, and how those constellations relate to our goals is beyond these short comments. But we have seen it done in the characteristics, we see their shadows in our program learning outcomes, we see the fruit of their guidance in our alumni and the amazing things they accomplish and are. But again, I think it all starts with a comprehensive knowledge of our sky.

We know that stars will rise and set, that they will change through the seasons. The constellations we fashion in our minds may be forgotten, and our major stars will be minor stars in the constellations of others. As Mau was able to adapt to new hemisphere, I think we must be ready for new skies, not new foundations. We might even be called to let go of things that no longer orient new generations. Easier said than done. I submit to you that future generations of students and educators might benefit from being the kinds of beholders who know how to read the sky, being imaginative and daring as they form orienting constellations for their moment on the sea.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude: how can we respond to the changing complexities of laying the foundation for engaging future generations of students and educators? In my brief sketch, I've suggested to you four thoughts.

First, that we might recognize that we are adrift in an increasingly contingent, post- foundational world. There's no telling where the next swell will come from.

Second, that we lean more squarely into our stars and constellations – our exemplars, principles, and values and how we connect them – which give our people direction as they traverse flux and change.

Third, that we intentionally seek and form in new generations of students, faculty, and staff as beholders of our sky from horizon to horizon and cultivate within them the imagination to form new Marianist constellations.

Fourth, that we encourage our communities to let these constellations be their points of reference as they go about doing the hard work of orienting society in a direction of justice.

Free from the desire for foundations which would cause us discomfort, accepting life adrift represents an invitation to return more squarely to what is essential in our mission. It is my hope that instead of drifting with the current, we will continue to be guided by Catholic, Marianist exemplars, principles, and values that are as numerous as the stars in the sky.