

“Responding to the Collective Angst in the Human Heart”

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How can we respond to the collective angst in the human heart?

Brother Tom asked me to speak for a few minutes on the question of how can we respond to the collective angst in the human heart. ... how can we respond to the collective angst in the human heart ... I think the obvious answer is that we respond with joy and gratitude to God. I'll say a little bit about why I love collective angst. I'll also suggest a few ways in which I think we can grow in our celebration of collective angst. We can live up to our purpose as Marianist Universities by helping our students understand their angst as indeed collective angst. Angst brings us into communion with others around us and our tradition. Our founders challenge us further to perfect our souls. In this case, I think our goal is not only to share in collective angst, but to find and to express our voices in the world.

Grateful for purpose

Before saying more about why I love collective angst, I'd just like to say how grateful I am that we have something to respond to. I'm glad we Marianist Universities have a purpose, something we might be good at, something we can contribute to the world. If I can be completely selfish for a minute, but also completely honest, I like my direct deposit notifications. My retirement advisor suggests I stay employed at least until I'm eligible for Medicare. Even with that self-interest fully disclosed, I must admit an unfortunate reality. What if we meet again in a few years and realize the world has no more needs that are not already being met by non-Marianist universities? There is only one thing we can do. We have to close our doors and call it a wrap. Our founders said as much in 1815 in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary.[#20]

"We must not be concerned at all about the designs of God concerning the duration of the Association. Duration is a very ambiguous appearance of perfection. It depends on the convergence of circumstances more than on the merits of the object itself."

While I am not seriously anticipating that we will close our universities for lack of work to do, I am proposing a mindset. Our founders were Christians. Christianity is a religion of martyrs. We know that self-preservation is not the highest good, is not an end in itself. We must be ready to respond to those within our organizations who say we need to be more like our competition in order to survive. No, we must be ourselves. We must be distinctive. We must be Marianist. We must not be concerned at all about the designs of God concerning self-preservation.

In the meantime, it is nice to have a job. It is nice to feel needed. It's no French Revolution, but if collective angst needs a response, I'm your man.

Angst is so much better than apathy

So on to why I love collective angst. First, angst is so much better than its opposite, namely apathy. I'm glad Brother Tom did not ask me to talk about how we can respond to the apathy of a large swath of the generation that sees faith as divisive and best avoided or at least not talked about. If I did have to talk about apathy, I would probably give the same talk and just say that embracing angst is the first step away from apathy.

Collective angst is the best kind of angst

Once we have broken free of apathy and entered the broad plain of angst, the next step is to recognize that collective angst is the best kind of angst. Think for a moment of a sad song. Think for a moment about how sad it is. Yet, I would like to suggest that if it is a song, it is something we can sing about, then that is a different kind of sadness than the sadness that cannot be sung. I can remember how I felt at a Leonard Cohen concert just a few years before he died. There were thousands of us gathered together participating in the music.

“Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in”

Sadness sung is a song. Angst shared is communion.

According to the poet Allen Ginsberg, spoken lonesomeness is prophecy.

“I'm an old man now, and a lonesome man in Kansas / but not afraid / to speak my lonesomeness in a car, / because not only my lonesomeness / it's Ours, all over America, / O tender fellows-- / & spoken lonesomeness is Prophecy / in the moon 100 years ago or in / the middle of Kansas now.”

Spoken lonesomeness is prophecy... really? A bit over the top?

“Cursed be the day on which I was born! May my birthday never be happy! Cursed be the one who told my father, ‘It's a boy’ and made him happy. Let him suffer the way I do because he did not kill me in the womb! Then my mother would have been my grave, her womb confining me forever. Why was I even born? to see sorrow and pain? to end my days in shame?”

That was me as a teenager (sorry Mom). It was also the prophet Jeremiah from ancient Jerusalem. Jeremiah's angst has been the collective angst of Judaism and Christianity for thousands of years. I'm a scholar of the Old Testament. I can give you etymologies and history of scholarship, but I don't have a definition of prophecy that contradicts spoken lonesomeness. What happens when we walk into the desert alone, maybe figurately maybe literally? What happens when we keep going? What happens when we keep going until we are unquestionably absolutely alone? What happens when there is nothing there but the wind, which may be God, if there is a God? What happens when we give voice to that? What if that moment can be expressed to others? What is that if not prophecy?

Are we doing enough to include diversity in our collective angst?

What a great day if we can find angst, show how it is collective, and give it voice? But I do have some critical questions I think we should be asking ourselves as we celebrate the collective angst of the human heart. First, are we doing enough to include diversity in our collective angst? When I say, “angst” do you think Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Mahler? Are we also including the collective angst of Maya Angelou?

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

That’s some good angst. It also points us in the direction of response, namely finding our voices and telling our stories. Try this one:

“Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. But anger is like fire. It burns it all clean.”

That one might be a bit more Ignatian than Marianist. Ignatius of Loyola said, “Go and set the world on fire!” Last week at MEA formation, Brother Tom told me he thought I should go back to the Ignatian charism. Personally, I think our Marianist commitment to social justice could benefit from some good anger, some fire, and some fervor. Chaminade himself referred to us as Mary’s militia.

We can also find plenty of angst with James Baldwin.

“There are so many ways of being despicable it quite makes one’s head spin. But the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people’s pain.”

Recognizing despicableness is always some good angst. We often talk about solidarity positively as a virtue, but I have to give it to Baldwin here. Lack of solidarity is really despicable. It’s more angsty stated that way.

One more quote from Baldwin will lead me to another question.

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.”

Yes, we feel angst, and reading makes us realize that we are not alone. But what shall we read? That brings me to my next critical question. Are we doing enough to form collective angst in faith? I suggest we read the Bible.

Are we forming collective angst in faith?

Our founders and those of us who are Christian worship a God who was tortured to death. What did he do up there on that cross? He quoted from Israel’s great repository of collective angst, the book of Psalms, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That’s some great angst! As the Marianist Family, we align our efforts with someone known as “Our Lady of Sorrows.” That sounds like something my niece would use as a Twitter handle.

Then there's the wisdom literature:

“Futility of futilities, says Qoheleth, futility of futilities! All things are futile! What profit have we from all the toil which we toil at under the sun? One generation departs and another generation comes, but the world forever stays. All rivers flow to the sea, yet never does the sea become full. To the place where they flow, the rivers continue to flow. All things are wearisome, too wearisome for words. The eye is not satisfied by seeing nor has the ear enough of hearing. What has been, that will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun! Even the thing of which we say, "See, this is new!" has already existed in the ages that preceded us. There is no remembrance of past generations; nor will future generations be remembered by those who come after them. A bad business God has given to human beings to be busied with. I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is futile and a chase after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and you cannot count what is not there.”

Just reading this with you here I'm back at that Leonard Cohen concert.

“Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in”

I think many of my students think of religion as the kid stuff they did with grandma. They think they grew out of it, into serious adult angst. We give them such a gift when we show that people of faith have felt the same collective angst. They gave voice to collective angst and handed down a rich tradition of collective angst. The warm lovey fuzzy expression of Christianity, what I call Barney the Dinosaur theology, is at best an incomplete picture of what formation in faith has to offer young people today.

Are we doing enough to communicate the value of a collective angst education to prospective students?

That brings me to my last critical question. Are we doing enough to communicate the value of a collective angst education to prospective students? Are we communicating to high school juniors and seniors what is distinctive about a Catholic and Marianist education? Consider two alternative marketing pitches.

“Come to St. Mary's to earn enough credits to earn a degree that will improve your employability.”

No collective angst! Now try this one:

“Come to St. Mary's to join a community that learns how others have given voice to their feelings and experiences and in turn find your own voice.”

Now that's some collective angst! Maybe that's not for everyone. But for the people that need that, we want them at St. Mary's. We have a lot to offer young people. We have received what has been handed down to us. We are ready to offer young people a sense of validation, of

community, of faith, of meaning, and of commitment. It is a good time to be a Marianist educator.