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DANIEL PINTI

Is, Ought, and Honors

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Somewhat uncomfortably, I confess that the question “What is Honors?” rings a bit too Platonic to these ears. I hardly feel qualified to describe “Honors” in terms of its timeless, disembodied, ideal Form, although I suppose the shadows on the wall of my own humble cave are recognizable enough. Honors at Niagara University has as its primary purpose to enrich the academic experience of NU’s most talented students, and we try to do so by weaving coursework and individual research opportunities into each student’s curriculum in order to enhance both the general education and the major programs. We put on a burgeoning undergraduate research conference every year. We recently revised our curriculum to offer our students a wider array of Honors courses. We devote a great deal of well-spent energy to advising our students, helping each to find a way to make the Honors experience truly complementary to his or her overall academic work.

Honesty, however, prompts me to describe NU Honors further. Our Honors population is rather too large for the amount of resources our school can devote to it, to the detriment of that very population. We lag behind many honors programs in our ability to foster a true sense of community among our students. We’d like to have a first-year seminar but, for various reasons, we can’t, and the very flexibility we offer our students is both a strength and a weakness. I do not mean to belabor the point. Like many (all?) honors programs, the Honors Program at Niagara might well have to answer the question “What is Honors?” with “Honors at my institution is *not all it should be*.” The desire (not to say need) for greater resources in the form of release time, staff, space, financial aid, and so forth is one keenly felt by many an honors administrator, including myself. It is the painful tension between “is” and “ought,” between what we are as a program and what we feel we ought to be.

Of course, such a tension is hardly unique to honors programs. Every major program from accounting to zoology wants a bigger budget; every administrator, however successful, knows the frustrations of visions unrealized. I would suggest, however, that this tension, if not exclusive to honors, is peculiarly characteristic of it because it is the tension most acutely felt in individual terms by our honors students themselves—those earnest, driven, overachieving persons for whom academic pressures are especially intense. There is a parallel between a desire for excellence within an honors program and a desire for excellence within an honors student—and, more to the point, a parallel between the anxieties such desire can produce. In that respect, how many of us were once where our students are now? How many of us are still there?

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We probably cannot help but define “Honors”—that is, honors for each of us, honors in each of our respective, irreducible experiences—partly in terms of what it is not, in terms of acknowledging the is/ought tension with which we live. The questions that must follow, though, are of great importance. How do we keep that tension from being paralyzing, even destructive? And are we best serving our students if we manifest that same tension in how we teach in and administer our (their) program? Perhaps each honors program simply ought (such a difficult word to escape!) to do what it can to *be more fully* what it is, with less energy and certainly much less angst given to what it (supposedly) ought to be. Please do not misunderstand: I am not advocating acquiescence. I am not arguing we should each settle for whatever status quo we have. But it is worth reminding ourselves that, while honors administrators, faculty, and staff are called to foster academic excellence, we are not committed to burdening ourselves with unrealizable expectations, much less to pursuing change for its own sake.

The point is that maybe the best thing we can do in honors—for honors to be most fully what it *is*—is to focus more of our energies on “educating” students in the etymological sense of that word, leading out of them their truest selves, guiding them away from the distractions and pressures that seem to be so necessary for self-definition and fulfillment in our culture but that in fact are stifling, even debilitating. We can teach them the value of choosing to do fewer things and doing them more fully, even contemplatively. Maybe what our students most need to hear from us, see in us, and learn is that they already have what they need to become themselves. I have in mind here the ruminations of Maria Lichtmann in her book *The Teacher’s Way: Teaching and the Contemplative Life* (Paulist Press 2005). Lichtmann contends that:

Paradoxically, seeing our teaching as contemplative means seeing that we already have everything we need. Such an awareness contradicts the striving, overzealous, achievement-oriented attitude we are trained in and then pass on to our students in one form or another. This statement, ‘You already have everything you need,’ speaks of grace, of presence, of a foundational, ontological, and ultimately transformative love. Most of us probably never heard this kind of affirmation in our training. If anything, we were told to do more, produce more, keep striving for perfection. We have been victims of the out-of-balance perfectionism of patriarchy. (8)

As an honors teacher and administrator, I find Lichtmann’s book an invitation to intense reflection. I don’t mean to imply that students cannot and should not grow intellectually during college and (in part) by means of their honors experiences. Rather, my point is that if our programs can foster a certain “inwardness” in our students—the purpose of which is self-understanding, not mere solipsism—then we might be doing them a very important service indeed. We and our students live with and within the governing “oughts” of competition and perfectionism, but honors need not be the place to replicate and reinforce them. We can “accept” each student in a way that goes far deeper than a congratulatory letter welcoming her into the program.

I know this suggestion may sound counterintuitive to many of us, even antithetical to what honors is all about. But if I *were* to imagine a transcendent, ideal essence

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of “Honors,” central to it would be its capacity to be transformative. We simply do not offer the possibility of transformation to hyper-ambitious, even perfectionist students who have been formed by a culture of unreflective acquisition if all they get from us is more of the same. As Lichtmann asks, “In an academic world characterized by increasing discord, alienation, faculty burnout, student consumerism, and an overall market mentality, where does one find the temple of renewal?” (16). Why should we and our students not find it in honors? If we “ought” to do so—and increasingly I am coming to believe just that—then my most fundamental challenge as an honors administrator is to figure out how to make that possible in terms of where we are, who we are, and who I am. Admittedly, what I am sketching in this brief reflection is neither a predetermined strategy nor a handy solution, but a concept, and perhaps a path.

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