

My Experience at the Barrytown College 3 Day University - Richard Panzer

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"Today people cannot believe anything unless it is logical. God is truth and truth is logical. There can be no perfection in ignorance"

Thus spoke Rev Moon back in 1974 to an audience in New York's Madison Square Garden (MSG).

And MSG was where I emerged from the JFK sky train into a bustling New York, en route for the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS). I was to attend an event designed to 'display [UTS's] faith in the vitality, talent, and intellectual 'firepower' of Unificationists and like-minded allies and colleagues in America, and in our capacity to contribute to the larger culture and world," (Dr. Richard Panzer, President of UTS.)

It was a long way to travel from Germany for such an event, but the enticing titles of the presentations convinced me that the trip would be worthwhile. 'My Neurons Made Me Do It'; 'Tipping Point of Good and Evil'; 'What Science Says About Love and Relationships'. It was hard to resist. I have always been fascinated by the interface of science and religion, and feel that it is so important that religious and faith-based concepts keep pace with modern science and are able to stand up to scrutiny. So often spirituality and religion move into esoteric realms, and depart from good common sense. We would do well to remember Rev Moon's words.

And so on January 9th, I was sitting in the chapel of UTS in Barrytown, surrounded by nearly 200 Generation Peace Academy (GPA) trainees and a handful of UTS faculty members and local Unification Church ministers. (GPA is a post high school year of service for young Unificationists). We were greeted by Dr Stephen Murray, dean of UTS, and Dr. Michael Balcomb, vice-president of the Unification Church USA. In his welcoming talk, Dr. Balcomb encouraged us to use the opportunity provided by the 'three day University' to explore the interaction between faith and reality and to reflect upon how we could apply spiritual values to solve problems in our communities, nation and world.

The event offered a wide choice of 15 topics, presented in two 90 minute morning sessions and one longer afternoon session. The presentations fell into one of three categories: 'science and religion', 'faith and reality', and 'culture and spirituality', and the scope was wide and tantalizing. My dilemma was to make a choice from simultaneous sessions. To attend 'the Spiritual Dimensions of Music and Art/Music as a Change Agent' (presented by David Eaton, director of the New York City Symphony) or 'What Science says about Love and Relationships' (presented by Lynn Walsh and Richard Panzer)? Tough decision!

Well, I chose David Eaton's lecture, and was treated to a fascinating analysis of music from a historical and principled perspective, with excerpts from composers as different as Beethoven and Billy Joel.

An old friend and fellow 'Brit.', Alison Wakelin, Senior Lecturer in Physics and Astronomy at Widener University, gave a presentation on "Scientific Perspectives on the Origins and Nature of the Universe" Despite a title suggesting 'IQ less than 150 need not attend', she gave a fascinating and insightful lecture which was thoroughly appreciated by her audience of mostly science novices.

Dr. Keisuke Noda is a UTS faculty member and chairman of the World Religions and Philosophy Department at Barrytown College. He presented two seminars on the " Tipping Point of Good and Evil: Integrated Self and Meaning of Life". He challenged us to consider deeply how much it is possible to be influenced in the direction of evil by peer pressure and unthinking obedience to authority figures. He used examples from real life ('the Milgram experiment 'of the 60's), and fiction, (the novel 'the Wave'-'die Welle') to illustrate his talk.

'My Neurons Made Me Do It: The New Brain Science', was presented by Dr. Kathy Winings, Vice President of Academic Affairs at UTS. This rapidly developing field of neuroscience is giving us great new insights into what goes on in the brain and, of particular interest to me, what happens on a demonstrable, physical level when we have a 'spiritual experience' . The focus of Dr Winings' talk was on how habits and learning form and shape neural pathways, and she also explored the concepts of 'original nature' vs 'fallen nature'. The presentation was most thought provoking, and stimulated many deep and challenging questions.

Several presentations also explored issues raised by the President of HSA-UWC USA Rev. Hyung Jin Moon and Chairman of the Tongil Foundation Rev. Kook Jin Moon regarding the "Freedom Society." These included "Economics for a Free Society" presented by Dr. Mark Isaacs, a UTS adjunct professor; "Principled Perspectives on Governance" presented by Dr. Gordon Anderson, President of Paragon House Publishers, and "Church and State: Status of Religious Freedom around the World" by Dan Fefferman, president of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom. It was with a torn heart that I missed these talks, tending to choose those with a more scientific content.

To counterbalance the 'information overload', time was allocated in the afternoons and evenings for non-academic activities. Movies, games, and sports were offered, but I preferred to use my spare time to walk around the snow covered grounds on the famous 'Father's Trail', 'and Mother's Trail', or to engage in stimulating exchanges with fellow Unificationists and to hear the perspective of those who are living in the USA in these turbulent times.

We could tour the Barrytown building which is currently undergoing extensive renovations in preparation for its first college intake this autumn. The postgraduate seminary classes have now moved to NYC, but it is expected that approval from the New York State Education Department will be granted in February 2013 for an undergraduate college offering a liberal arts degree on the Barrytown campus.

The main focus of the 3 day event was to stimulate interest in the new college amongst the GPA members, many of whom will move onto higher education this summer. But it was a pity that there were only a few older Unificationists like me in attendance, because the content was high quality and entirely appropriate for a very wide and mixed audience.

Overall the event was very worthwhile, and I am encouraged that we as a movement are broadening our horizons and encouraging critical thinking, while fostering a basic attitude of faith and spirituality.

Perhaps a similar event can be organized in Europe?