

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 36

J. Scharfen
July 29, 2021



There were years when teaching Dante took more time than I had allocated in the schedule, and I reluctantly had to eliminate CS Lewis or Augustine from the curriculum. I always found this wrenching, but I did not have unfettered control of the calendar.



One of the great innovations introduced at Cardinal Newman was the Community Based Service Learning

program, or "CBSL." Many Catholic high schools have required community service to be performed by their students, and long before CBSL, this had always been the practice at Cardinal Newman. However, my good friends, Dr. Maryanne Berry and John Contreras, introduced an integrated English Department and Theology Department CBSL curriculum that became quite developed over my years of teaching. The new CBSL curriculum added a research and writing assignment to the Senior Service Project. The final exams for seniors in both departments included making a presentation of their research and service before students, faculty, and community members the week before finals officially began.



These service projects consume at least 100 hours of a senior's time in their final year. The good done in the community heightens the consciousness of the individual students, deepens their hearts, awakens them to new possibilities, and raises the profile of Cardinal Newman in Sonoma County and across Northern California. Actually, the impact has become both national and international. For instance, students have worked with national level veterans and health organizations, as well as served in Southeast Asia, Mexico, Central America, India, and Africa. For twelve years I have brought students to Vietnam to work with the Catholic sisters in Saigon and the Central Highlands. We have worked with impoverished urban kids, a leprosy community, and the developmentally disabled (many suffering from continued genetic defects related to Agent Orange). I have involved students in supporting schools and a hospital in Zimbabwe, and taken Newman graduates with me there as volunteers. Living for the sake of others by undertaking a service project removes young people from their comfortable environments and places them in the position to meet God in the midst of a suffering humanity. CBSL became a powerful means of transforming the hearts and minds of Newman students.

The CBSL curriculum began to expand into the junior and sophomore years, as the program gained traction. Thus, elements of my syllabus were crowded out as the research and writing requirements for our service work began to increase. Thus, some years Augustine or Lewis became casualties of this other good.

What I could never give up was the poetry, film, and reading that, in the fourth quarter, pulled together the course themes for the entire year.

We began our poetry study with Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." This gave me an opportunity to lecture on his collection of essays, "Culture and Anarchy," in which he discusses the rise of Western Civilization as the result of the confluence of Hebraism and Hellenism. Arnold saw culture as the pivotal solution to the political and social problems of the 19th Century, "to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light." The poem, "Dover Beach," sounded a more melancholic and pessimistic note, as in the mid-19th Century, the European continent seemed to be slipping into a dangerous and chaotic darkness. Having been exposed to classical themes and literary techniques all year, the students gained confidence as they discovered themselves to be competent readers of Arnold's work. It also was a time of great satisfaction for me as a teacher, to see the intellectual pieces coming together in their minds.



I also wanted to awaken the students to their capacity to use art and literature to see the world and their place in it. Thus, I sought to broaden the scope of the intergenerational conversation they had joined at the beginning of the year, as a search for individual meaning, to entertain larger questions as they engaged the world around them. I framed the fourth quarter curriculum as "cultural critique," a conceptualization which dovetailed well with their service work.

A piece of writing that helped the students understand the necessity for moving from a selfish to an unselfish perspective, as part of this developing capacity to see their world, was a commencement address delivered by the writer David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005. The speech opens up with a short bit of allegory: Two younger fish swim by an older fish, who asks them, "How's the water boys?" The young fish keep swimming and one turns to the other and asks, "What the hell is water?" Wallace goes on to address the difficulty we have in identifying the water we swim in, day after day, and the importance of going beyond our default selfish thinking. Wallace's analysis of human self-centeredness, always brought to mind Augustine's description of the selfishness of babies in his "Confessions." For Wallace, the cure was exercising our minds by empathizing, by trying to understand the circumstances of others.

