

The Right Place for Everything"

by Tracy Balzer, *Tending the Holy Graduate*

Years ago, our church staff and a number of volunteer leaders, myself included, attended a time management seminar. I learned great lessons like, "only handle each piece of paper that comes your way once," and "by writing your commitments down, you're putting them in a place your mind trusts," and "always prioritize the responsibilities of your day into categories." I was sure this was going to revolutionize my disorganized life. And, I got a spiffy looking notebook out of the deal, which helped me perpetuate the illusion.

Time management techniques can really be helpful, so much so that sometimes we take a similar approach to our spiritual lives, sorting things out into files and specific topics. Putting some parts of life into a "spiritual" file, and others into a "secular" file can make us feel like we have a grip on things. Sometimes we live more from the heart. Other times we operate exclusively from our heads.

For example, as a campus minister, I pray with students, design community worship services, preach, comfort and console, admonish and nurture. When I do these kinds of things, I'm operating in "pastor-mode." It is very easy for me to default to a purely "heart" category.

But in the midst of those duties, I'm also a university professor. I lecture, write tests, grade papers, make powerpoint presentations, and generally try to inspire young minds to expand their horizons. When I do these kinds of things, I really need to have my "thinker" turned on; it's when I feel compelled to make the leap from the heart category to the "head" category.

From the outside, the successful passage from one side of my professional life to the other might seem rather impressive. I can ping and pong for quite a long time. (The time management folks would be so proud!) But internally, it is exhausting. The maxims that urge us to put everything into a "category" simply cannot be transferred to matters of the heart, specifically, our life of faith in Christ.

When I try, it makes me feel spiritually schizophrenic.

For truly, we were made to be *whole people*, integrated people (as opposed to *dis-integrated*: pieces of ourselves flying in all different directions). People who love God with heart, soul, mind, strength all at once. People who connect with God in meaningful ways, whether we are solving the riddles of dark matter, buying new shoes, or taking the Eucharist. It is terribly easy to succumb to the incorrect understanding that some endeavors are inherently more "spiritual" than others and require the full, exclusive use of our hearts. And those *others* are clearly more "secular," likewise requiring the full engagement of our intellect.

The apostle Paul addresses this issue in a curious way in his letter to the church at Colossae. "Set your minds on things above," he says in chapter three, "not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden in Christ with God." Here we see the blending of the head and heart. Yes, we are to use our heads: we are to be focusing, thinking with our minds. But what we are to think about is that which is intangible, invisible, and mysterious - the things of the heart. Set your *minds* on things *above*.

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It is not that using our minds is somehow "secular," but that we are to think about all of life (the dark matter, the shoes, the worship services) in the same ways that Jesus thinks about them. Mind and heart work *together*. We are not to leave one realm to visit the other, but can exist in both realms, the intellectual/practical/objective right alongside the internal/invisible/subjective.

I've spent many years fascinated with the faith expression of the ancient Celtic Christians that lived in Ireland and Scotland. From the time of Saint Patrick in the fourth century to the very earthy faith of the Highland Christians of the 19th century, the Celtic ideal of celebrating the presence of Christ in all things was passed on to the next generation. I am captivated by their lively, poetic ways of praying, of inviting God's presence not just into their most "sacred" duties, but most often into the daily, ordinary tasks of life. They prayed as if what they were doing really had a place in the sacredness of things, and with the confidence that God joyfully joined them there.

(A prayer when getting dressed in the morning): (And one of my favorites, a prayer when milking the cow):

*Even as I clothe my body with wool
Cover Thou my soul with the shadow of Thy wing*

*Bless, O God, my little cow,
Bless, O God, my desire;
Bless Thou my partnership
And the milking of my hands, O God.*

(A prayer when washing one's face with water):

*The palmful of the God of Life,
The palmful of the Christ of Love,
The palmful of the Spirit of Peace,
Triune
Of grace.*

When we divide our world into "head" and "heart" or "secular" and "sacred" we are effectively confessing that we don't believe God could be interested in any of the ordinary things we do. That driving to the grocery store has no spiritual significance, that signing the contract for a new home surely has no ramifications in the life of the Spirit. Yet the Celts teach us, in the prayer above, that even something seemingly as lowly as milking a cow can actually be a holy enterprise. It is an opportunity, perhaps it is even our duty, to acknowledge that we are collaborators with God in his grand design. Me, the cow, and God, working together to do something that may actually give life to someone else (providing milk). And if not that, perhaps it is sufficient that we are acknowledging God's presence and cooperating with him there. There are no categories to be found here, rather, all is holy.

Eugene Peterson's rendition of the Colossians passage is helpful here:

"Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ-that's where the action is. See things from his perspective." So when I design worship services, I can engage my mind as well as my heart. And when I teach my students, I can present objective truth from a heart-felt, Christ-like perspective.

When we set our minds on things above, we do not deny the tension we feel as spiritual beings living in a transitory, material world. Rather, we celebrate the joy that comes from living an integrated life, a God-saturated life, where God's presence is acknowledged in all things, and every endeavor is seen as holy. where head and heart work in tandem to love God. ■