Imitate Me: We teach what we are

Not too long ago I found myself leaning on a student who had been found guilty of cheating in his chemistry course. I hammered him for stealing others' work, for lying about his misdeed, for his complete disregard of his fellow classmates. How could someone be so selfish, self-deluded? These students and the sad state of their values! That evening, I read the story of Enron. It isn't that these students don't have values; it's that they've got our values!

I am unmoved by the current discussion of "values" at college. The values being pushed tend to be so desiccated, detached, and generic – justice, fairness, apple pie and motherhood – the view of how human beings become moral so attenuated and abstract as to be irrelevant. As an ethicist friend puts it, "Used cars have values; people don't." It isn't that college students are not learning "values," it's the values that they are learning. Any student who lies, cheats, steals, organizes the whole world around himself has values. Chairman Lay is us all over.

People don't live by values. What people live by is examples, models, mentors. I want these discussions to move from shopping lists of desirable preferences, generic abstractions, to actual focus upon how human beings grow up and how college can more effectively contribute to that process of becoming human. Which brings me to one of history's great ethical teachers, Saint Paul.

After eleven long chapters in which he attempted to set right the wayward Corinthians through exhortation, excoriation, and ridicule, St. Paul blurts out, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (I Cor. 11:1). Imitate me. Is there no limit to a preacher's presumption? It's a statement repeated by Paul in a number of other writings, "Imitate me, you have a worthy example in us." Imagine me, first day of class saying to the gathered students, "Whereas there are readings, assignments, your final grade will be determined on the basis of how well you imitate me. The goal of this course is to urge your life to look like mine."

But this is not what I say. What I say, first class session, is, "In this course, I'll expose you to a number of ideas (none of them necessarily my own), I'll offer you a detached look at a few dead thinkers (none of whom are necessarily important to me) and then I will leave you free to make up your own mind. After all, being better than Saint Paul, I wouldn't want any of you to imitate me." This, I call, pedagogical humility, moral modesty. Another name might be irresponsibility.

You and I, in the modern university, are heirs to that moral tradition that acts as if it is possible to have ethics without a tradition. Ethics is what we make up, on our own, as we go. This is surely the end result of the Kantian project to democratize ethics, to make moral living available for everyone, regardless of that person's abilities, parents, environment, or
commitment to the ethical task. By using an allegedly natural endowment Kant calls “reason,” anyone could think well, and therefore do well. By using Kant’s methodology, anyone could discern, and would therefore do, what’s right. For Kant’s “categorical imperative,” “right” is that basic bureaucratic procedure that any nameless, faceless, individual might do anywhere when faced with a similar situation. Such thinking has contributed to what some have called our Procedural Society. We act as if ethics is a list of values that then lead to a set of procedures which, when applied to life, will yield good deeds when done by anyone regardless of that person’s character, community, and tradition.

Our values centered, procedural approach is a quite odd way of conceiving of ethics. Aristotle said that if you wanted a “canon” or rule in ethics, you ought to measure yourself by a good person. Thus Aristotle’s chief analogy for learning how to do good deeds is learning how to ride a horse. You can’t learn equestrianship by reading books about it. You must actually get on a horse. No, you must first submit to the wisdom of a master, someone who has given his or her life to equestrianship. The master will help you get to know a horse, to learn to differentiate between the temperament of one horse and another, to get the feel of the reins in the hand, to know yourself, the ways that you are good with certain horses, and can’t be trusted alone with others. Becoming moral is much like that, said Aristotle.

The great thing about college students is that they are desperate for examples. They seem almost instinctively to know that there is no way around the Aristotelian path of imitation. This puts Paul’s “imitate me” into classical perspective. The purpose of a teacher is modeling. The purpose of a student is imitation. There is an undeniably elitist nature to higher education in which a student submits to the model of a master. We all teach by example, whether we want to or not. Example is the most potent instructor. This is what students have always known when they talk about signing up for the teacher rather than the course.

If Aristotle and St. Paul have a good read on moral development, then we need a fundamental reexamination of the ways in which we have tried to do higher education. We have structured higher education in such a way, on all too many campuses, so as to minimize the possibility of observation, and example. Higher education in America is moving from that classical vision of a college as a collection of colleagues, faculty and students, in close proximity to one another, eating together, living together, for a period of time in which there is maximum opportunity for observation, argument, interaction, and just hanging out. We are moving toward a model in which there is minimal faculty-student interaction, contact limited mostly to class, where students are fairly much left to their own devices outside of the classroom, abandoned to their peers who do not know much more about adulthood than they. I am sure Aristotle, and I think that St. Paul, would regard this as a bizarre way to grow up.

One of our great intellectual challenges is that we are a people in the grip of liberal individualism, so celebrated by John Dewey. The individual, isolated self is the source of all moral wisdom. Ethics is a rational matter of thinking toward the right thing to do, rather than a character matter of being a good person. We have over rationalized ethics, moving it to the rational and the verbal when it ought to be the province of the exemplary. The attempt to order behavior primarily through information and through the selection of popular ethical imperatives (values) tends to over rationalize moral life. The wellsprings of moral activity lie deeper—in the area of imitation, the imagination, and the affections.
People who have good characters, who are living a good life, become themselves, imperatives in a way that "values," and "principles," can never be.

Character rather than values ought to be the center of our discussion. Character is an affirmation that some of the most ethical things you do are done, as we say, àœœout of second nature,àŒ without having to think about it, not because of the list of values that we affirm but rather because of the sort of persons that we have become. Those of you who are grown ups working on a college campus can testify that one of the great burdens of being an adult amid a community of (in Sharon Parksâ€™ term àœœNovice AdultsâŒ) is that they are always staring at you. There I am, lecturing on the precepts of Jesus, and there they are staring at me, thinking, àœœGod donâ€™t let me look like that at fifty! Iâ€™m going to the gym every day. Iâ€™m not going to let myself go like that!âŒ

One of the great tests for whether or not someone ought to be working in higher education is whether or not that person is willing to be the object of imitation. And one of the most important tasks of college students is to find mentors, models, those worthy of imitation during some of the most formative years of their developing lives.

As Augustine said, "We imitate whom we adore." We need teachers who are willing to be adored and therefore imitated. Our young people need heroes. And all we offer our young people are celebrities. As Sharon Parks has told us, we must develop an ecology of mentoring on our campuses, must make our campuses places where there are ample opportunities for developing the practice of friendship. You know why I am a foe of much of the current enthusiasm for àœœdistance learningàŒ and increased technology in lieu of the classroom and the dorm. If a professor teaches in such a way that he can be easily replaced by a computer, then that professor ought to be replaced. As a Christian, I believe in a doctrine called the Incarnation, the strange idea that God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1). I think there is just no way around bodies, embodiment of our rather abstract àœœvalues.âŒ Something happens in the encounter between bodies that can never be replicated by a computer.

A friend of mine did a study of college mottoes, college statements of mission, beginning in the Nineteenth Century, moving into the Twentieth. He noted that colleges in North America began by saying something like, àœœCome here and you will gain wisdom.âŒ By the early Twentieth Century, colleges talked less about wisdom and more about àœœknowledge.âŒ We produce knowledge the same way that Henry Ford produces cars. By the end of the Twentieth Century, colleges spoke of themselves as àœœproducing information.âŒ He predicts, if present trends continue, we will be saying, àœœCome to college, give us your money, and weâ€™ll give you a lot of data.âŒ

"I was in a discussion of a faculty member sometime ago when someone had the temerity to bring up the chaos within the faculty member's personal life. "We are not allowed to discuss such matters when evaluating faculty for hiring" the dean said. I would submit that this sort of thinking is a violation of the classic purposes of higher education.

Thus David Hokema, in his helpful book, Campus Rules, says that rather than writing books of rules and regulations for students we ought instead to get various respected and admired personalities on campus à" anyone from distinguished professors to a janitor or someone in food services à€“ to write short paragraphs on why alcohol is a concern for the college, why cheating ought to be grounds for dismissal. We work, in communities of higher education, not by rules, but by examples.
We had a group of students over to our house for lunch and then just hanging out one Sunday afternoon. One student said, “Dean Willimon, thanks for having us over. I’ve never been in a faculty home before.”

“What? That’s terrible!” I said. “I am a firm believer that we faculty ought to have students in our homes.”

“Well, not many other faculty think like that,” said the student.

“That’s outrageous,” I said.

“And you have such a beautiful home,” said the student. “Let me ask you, as a Christian, do you feel at all guilty living in such a nice house?”

Then I said, “Now I’m remembering why it was not such a great idea to invite you people over here.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you,” said the student.

“In a way, that makes it even more painful,” I said. Then I said, “You know, if you will stick with me, with your questions and observation and all, you might make me into a much better person than I would have been if I had not met you.”

And I meant it.