

religion, but rather it is public religion—the values and practices that guide and inform public life.

Questions about the proper focus for civic devotion are not new. People have always experienced tension between their loyalty to family, friends, and local community and their loyalty to other larger causes. In American history, this was especially evident during the conflagration of the Civil War. Although choices have always had to be made about where devotion should be directed, the new overlays of internationalism and ecozoic consciousness have dramatically complicated the task. Deciding which of these different “civics” has the largest claim on one’s life and learning how to balance competing claims is a challenge.⁴² Understanding the role of religion in these choices is complicated, especially when historic religion itself becomes an additional focus of loyalty. For some individuals, there are times when fealty to a historic religious tradition exists in tension with allegiances to community, nation, the globe, or all living things. In such cases, historic religion can become another competing “civic loyalty” that must be weighed in comparison to other objects of devotion.

Civic engagement is not simply about getting involved or changing the system or doing good; it involves making important decisions about how, when, and why one becomes civically engaged. And those decisions revolve around more than merely personal ideals and preferred ways of life. Civic engagement embodies socially negotiated, often contested conclusions about what really matters to local communities, nations, and the world. Helping people, defending values, and protecting threatened species and ecosystems are all religious declarations of a sort, ways of making one’s own ultimate concerns visible for others to see and of entering into the ongoing and never-ending debate about social values and practices. Giving sustained and intelligent attention to the religious dimensions of civic engagement is one way that colleges and universities can encourage students to become more self-conscious, self-directed, and self-critical participants in public life.

 9

Convictions

In what ways are personal convictions related to the teaching and learning process?

A FACULTY MEMBER from a major Midwestern research university told us about a student in her astronomy class who arrived during office hours one day, wondering if they might talk about something a bit personal. The student recounted how she had been a convinced atheist when she began the astronomy course, but what she had learned about the complexity and beauty of the universe had made her uncertain. Its intricacies were turning her into some kind of reverent agnostic, and she wanted to talk about it. Experiences like this one are not uncommon. For many students, the undergraduate years are a time of faith lost or modified or sometimes regained, with faith in this case meaning the ideas, ideals, hopes, and desires that define the core of how a person sees and feels and commits to others and the world.

Thinking about personal faith, beliefs, and convictions is different from the analysis that is typical of scholarly discourse within the academy. In the academic debates of the public sphere, what matters is evidence and argument. These factors matter too in the private domain of convictions and commitments, but other considerations are at least as important. As the seventeenth-century mathematician and mystic Blaise Pascal once said, “The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.” The academic and the personal are interconnected, not independent, arenas. The reasoning of the heart can be swayed by reasons of the head (and vice versa). But the connections between these two different ways of thinking, assessing, and coming to conclusions are rarely straightforward. Academic reasoning and personal reflection intersect at a slant, making it hard to predict the outcomes of their intermingling.

Convictions are the bedrock beliefs that shape how people think and live, the beliefs that they figuratively, and sometimes literally, bet their lives on. Like all ideas and beliefs, convictions are neither good nor bad in the abstract. Strongly held convictions produce prophets and poets who seem to see the world more clearly than the rest of us and who have the courage and ability to "speak truth to power," but strongly held convictions also yield dangerous fanaticism and destructive fantasies, the catalysts for suicide bombers and for parents who refuse medical care for their children because they believe God will heal them. Weak convictions lead to different problems: people who have "no mind of their own," sheep incapable of principled choices who are led to the slaughter by the first charismatic leader to arrive on the scene.

The convictions that students bring with them to college will shape what and how they learn, and conversely the material in college and university courses can unsettle previous convictions, as it did with the atheist-turned-agnostic astronomy student. Disinterested logic and academic analysis are major components in the learning process, but personal convictions often drive thinking and decision-making. This is true even for the most rational of all college and university professors. Understanding the role of convictions is a necessary component of the examined life. Becoming aware of one's own convictions and the convictions of others and learning how to converse intelligently about them goes to the heart of why colleges and universities exist.

Theories of Development

There are many different theories about how human beings learn and how we develop our differing sets of convictions. Theories of development often describe a series of cognitive, social, or moral stages that individuals progress through sequentially.² The theory that has been most influential in higher education is one laid out by William G. Perry in *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1970).³ Perry postulates that college students generally progress through three stages. When entering college, most students are dualists; they see the world in simple binaries (good/bad, us/them, right/wrong). The second stage is one of moral and cognitive relativism, when students become aware of multiplicity. In the third stage, students transcend the confusion of pure relativism and take steps toward mature self-awareness and nuanced commitment. Like most stage theories of human development, Perry's assumes that moving from one stage to the next requires a personal crisis, a moment when it becomes apparent that one's existing beliefs or convictions are no longer adequate. It is the crumbling of prior belief structures that gives individuals the gumption to undertake the hard work of rethinking and reconfiguring the convictions that guide their lives.

Many professors, or at least many of those who have been around for a while, assume that Perry's stage scheme is a generally accurate portrayal of what students should (and will) experience during the college years. That is, professors have assumed that students enter their university years encumbered by a host of pre-critical attitudes and pre-formed views of the world that need to be dismantled in order to clear the way for new learning and critical thinking. For some professors, this task alone comprises the necessary and sufficient job description for teaching at the university level. The professor's role is to open students' minds by introducing ideas that conflict with the inadequate ones they currently possess, and it is then the responsibility of students themselves to rebuild a new convictional framework that moves beyond mere relativism.

It is questionable whether such a strategy continues to make sense today, given that many students now enter college already firmly established in Perry's second stage. They already understand multiplicity, arriving on campus as comfortable relativists who are fully aware that the world is a complicated place populated by different groups of people who see the world from different perspectives. They still may be pre-critical in their thinking and may have a host of unexamined beliefs, but the deconstruction of naïve dogmatism no longer seems to be the predominant need. Instead, many current students know they are afloat, and they are looking for a firm place to stand. This is not so much a search for cognitive grounding as for something worthy of trust. What should one hope for? What values should one rely on for guidance? Where can one find a life compass for thinking and living? Or should people just let themselves drift along in whatever cultural currents happen to catch them?

Although students do have a host of "big questions" in front of them, those questions are not necessarily the same big questions that educators would like them to discuss. Professors are often attracted to the kinds of deep human questions that emerge from reading the great published works of the past and present, and they are disappointed when students react as if those grand musings have little or nothing to do with their own life questions and concerns. And even when professors do try to link course material to the existential concerns of students, students are still sometimes reluctant to engage. A student at one college explained to us that some professors try to introduce topics that are just "too personal for class. No one is going to reveal that much of themselves in class." Discussing big questions and student convictions in a college or university course is not necessarily easy, even when both students and professors favor its occurrence. One option is for colleges and universities to just stop trying, to ratchet back expectations regarding student learning. In his book *The First Year Out*, sociologist Tim Clydesdale argues that first-year college students are typically in no position to reflect deeply (or even shallowly) on who they are and what they believe. Most college and university students, he says, have their hands full simply dealing with

the details of "daily life management," and they keep "their core identities in an 'identity lockbox'" that is largely immune to change. During the sophomore and junior years, there may be a brief window of opportunity when deeper questions can be raised, but by the time they are seniors, the only thing on their minds is getting out and getting a job. The result, according to Clydesdale, is that the thinking of most students remains "remarkably conventional" and "the vast majority . . . are quite uninterested in seeking new self-understandings."⁴

Rather than trying to force students to examine their convictions, explore a range of different possibilities, and develop more refined views of the world, Clydesdale says it probably makes more sense for colleges and universities to adjust their unrealistic ideals to align more closely with the modest, circumscribed goals of their students. Although a few students—drawn disproportionately from those who are either highly religious or highly antireligious—are looking for a self-critical, intellectually liberating, socially broadening education, those kinds of students are rarities even at the most prestigious institutions of learning. According to Clydesdale, the statistics show that there is only one institutional subset where life-changing higher learning often takes place: at evangelically oriented Christian colleges like the one he himself attended. He hypothesizes that the high concentration of very religious students at these schools is the secret of their transformational educational success.⁵

Clydesdale's realism will be attractive to some: Let religious colleges and universities require students to engage whatever big questions they prefer, but let the rest of the academy do its work without getting bogged down in time-consuming and ultimately futile attempts to force students to reflect on their personal convictions. But is this really an option for higher education? The developmental psychologist Sharon Parks would answer "No." She argues that "higher and professional education is distinctively vested with the responsibility of teaching critical and systemic thought and initiating young lives into a responsible apprehension first of the realities and questions of a vast and mysterious universe and second of our participation within it."⁶ She insists that this is not a matter merely for the intelligentsia, pointing out that asking and attempting to answer such questions is a requirement for leaders in practical fields like law, medicine, politics, and education, and that the need for higher order thinking extends far beyond the professions. If society is to be healthy, then individuals in a multitude of roles, including stay-at-home parents and those with positions in all sectors of the business world, must also think about the universal questions of humanity. If colleges and universities (except for those with an explicitly religious perspective) fail to offer this opportunity to students, then who will? For people like Parks, what seems unrealistic (and unacceptable) is for a college or university to shy away from providing students with this kind of soul-stretching, self-reflective education.

Professorial Convictions

Professors are often portrayed, and often portray themselves, as people who think and live rationally. Rather than being driven by various personal beliefs or convictions, their work is dictated by the disciplines and methodologies of their various fields of study (as discussed in chapter seven). Their goal is to study and teach that material, not to share their life journeys or values with their students. But while their training may not encourage (and may even actively discourage) them from talking about their own beliefs, professors, like all other human beings, possess personal convictions and in the right circumstances they can bubble to the surface.

We learned this early in the research for this book when we asked a colleague to arrange a discussion group composed of faculty drawn from a variety of different disciplines and institutions (public and private, church-related and not) in southern California. The twenty or so participants were selected partly because their work seemed to have the potential for connections with religion, but the group represented multiple disciplines (from computer science and engineering to art, literature, and business) and multiple religious perspectives (from conservative members of major historic traditions to atheists). The event coordinator opened the meeting by asking the participants to briefly introduce themselves, perhaps by sharing something about their own life journeys, whether those were religious or not. The response was overwhelming. People began to talk, and they couldn't stop. The two of us had anticipated an analytic discussion, but instead the participants spent nearly an entire day simply recounting their own stories—stories of faith lost and faith regained, stories of religious disillusionment, stories of frustration with institutions, stories of human compassion, stories of connecting with students, stories of searching for and sometimes finding meaning in life. Their obvious hunger to talk about their own spiritual journeys was, simply put, astonishing.

During a later campus visit, we were told a story about a similar gathering, but with a very different outcome. The location was a prestigious East Coast research university, and the office of religious life had invited professors who were "faculty of faith" to gather for a discussion about the connections between their academic work and their religious convictions. More than sixty faculty members showed up, all of them looking a bit surprised to find so many others who were also "secretly" religious. The discussion leader talked for a moment about similarities in the training regimens of scientists and monks, and then the floor was opened for discussion. The conversation was robust and personal, until someone said, "But I'm an expert in science, not a faith expert," and in an instant the positive dynamic dissipated. Scholars are warned against venturing beyond their areas of expertise, and that is most decidedly something to keep in mind when meeting with colleagues at a prestigious research university.

Professors know firsthand just how much work it is to master a subject, and they are respectful of expertise. After spending a major chunk of their lives becoming credentialed in one narrow subject, most professors have high regard for expert opinions, and the most academically successful scholars usually speak in public only about those fields of study in which they have academic standing. The moral philosopher Susan Neiman has deftly described the unfortunate result: "This sounds like the stance that Irish poet W. B. Yeats described long ago: 'The best lack all conviction/while the worst are full of passionate intensity'... The noninterference pact that leads philosophers to refrain from talking about history, and historians from talking about morality, pretty much insures that few people with professional competence will jump into the fray—except in discussions too qualified to interest anyone but other specialists."⁷ Professors often operate out of something like a code of silence regarding any subject outside their own narrow field of expertise, but that does not make those other concerns go away, nor does it eliminate the influence of convictions in their lives and work. Like everyone else, professors have convictions and, examined or not, those convictions influence how they see the world, teach their classes, and interact with students.

Formation and Information in the Classroom

Information and formation are intermingled in every classroom. Information is the subject content of the course; formation has to do with the impact (whether strengthening, undermining, changing, or complicating) that the course in its entirety has on the personal convictions and behaviors of students. For most instructors, the course is the information it contains, and successful completion of a course is measured by the acquisition of a predetermined quantity of knowledge and the mastering of a particular academic skill set. One of our now long-retired graduate school professors personified this understanding of teaching when he began each class by saying "I'm pitching and you're catching." He pitched balls of knowledge for students to catch, and most of us did just that: We tried to take it all in as best we could. His classroom style was stridently unidirectional, with no questions asked and the professor in charge, but even this statistics course was a formative experience. An understanding of advanced statistics left some students much less willing to be swayed by the passionate stories of individuals; it was now the numbers that mattered. Others left the class feeling personally incompetent and, in self-defense, harboring a deep-seated distrust of statistics.

The material included in a course and the way it is communicated to students (through lecture, assignment, discussion, or service-learning project) is never formationally neutral. Information changes people, and the choices professors make about what information to include and what to ignore can greatly alter the experiences and convictions of students. The "simple" act of choosing texts can be

formative in powerful ways. Anouar Majid, chairman of the English department at the University of New England, describes how a devout Muslim friend, a highly educated engineer, had his conception of the United States (and to some degree his own faith) completely revolutionized by a careful reading of the Declaration of Independence. Majid asks, "How would he have reacted had he read Jonathan Edwards and the texts of other early American writers about the varied religious movements in American history, all struggling to establish the ideal society on earth? That classic American struggle, pitting pure faith against worldly success, is something Muslims could learn from, particularly educated youth looking for answers to their own cultural frustrations and identity crises."⁸

A college or university course is always more than its mere content, but content itself can carry a formative punch. We spoke with one psychology professor, for example, who told us that adding more information about "positive psychology" (the study of the attitudes and behavior of psychologically healthy individuals as opposed to people suffering from psychological problems) had changed the tenor of his courses. His current students are more apt to talk about ways of improving their own lives. He said they were still taking in lots of information, but they were processing it differently, not just mentally cataloguing it to regurgitate on an exam, but using it to make connections to their own hopes, dreams, and personal beliefs.

Critical Unsettling and Transcendent Unsettling

Students expect higher education to change them. One student who was making a decision about where to go to college tried to explain to her parents why she wanted to attend a school other than the one they preferred: "If I went to that college, it would fit the person I have been. I am choosing this college because it fits the person I am becoming."⁹ Another student gave us a similar explanation for the way she selects her elective courses: "I choose classes on how they will affect me, how they tie in with what I need to deal with as a person." These students think that higher education is not just about learning "more stuff." It also concerns learning about yourself and how to become "more you" in the best possible way.

A story about Mahatma Gandhi illustrates the point. An irate opponent once accused him of having no integrity, because he said something that contradicted what he had said the week before. Unperturbed, Gandhi replied that his opponent was indeed correct about the discrepancy, but it was because "I have learned something since last week."¹⁰ Gandhi's quick reply to his opponent communicates his awareness that learning has the power to change people, but it (perhaps wisely) ignores another aspect of the learning process. When the process of learning challenges personal conviction, it can be disturbing. It takes hard work to learn an academic subject or professional discipline, but the emotional ante goes up

whenever learning overflows into questions of conscience or conviction. In the language of developmental stage theory, convictional development is often triggered by a cognitive-emotional crisis: The values and convictions that formerly gave grounding and direction to life no longer seem viable. Although a crisis may not be required, people often need some degree of unsettling or affective uneasiness before they will re-evaluate their own convictions.

A poignant example is provided by Mark C. Taylor, a postmodern theologian who is currently chair of the department of religion at Columbia University, but who spent most of his career at Williams College in rural Massachusetts. One day his class was discussing the existentialist writers Sartre and Camus—two major figures in the history of philosophy, who say that human life is fundamentally meaningless—when a student named Jake asked, “Isn’t Camus the guy who killed himself in a car wreck?” Taylor said yes, adding that suicide was “not the only response to the human dilemma as existentialists see it. Rather . . . the absence of a given meaning for our lives gives us the opportunity to create our own meanings.” The student was asking a personal question, however, not an academic one. His convictions were in play, and he wasn’t satisfied with that response. So he persisted: “If Sartre is right, how can we hope? And if we cannot hope, why go on?” Once again, Taylor gave an academic response. He writes: “Rather than telling them what I really thought, I proceeded to explain how the writers we were reading would have responded to that question. Scholars, after all, are not supposed to think for themselves but are trained to analyze and report what others have already thought.” But Taylor says that, when his eyes met the student’s eyes, “I knew that he knew that I knew I had failed his test.” Taylor did not want to communicate his own personal sense of “suffering and uncertainty” to his student, but Jake, and probably most of the other students in the room, knew what he really thought, just like children know what their parents really think.¹¹

Taylor is a gifted teacher, and he also obviously understands how disconcerting it can be to question long-held beliefs. He also knows that some convictions are harder for human beings to bear than others. In particular, he did not want to force his own convictions, his own sense of stark realism, onto his students. His self-judgment that he “had failed” his student may, however, be overly harsh. Taylor responded as any good teacher would: He gave his students the information and insight they needed to make up their own minds about what to believe. He did not push his own conclusion on his students, but—and this is crucial—he obviously let enough of himself shine through that his students ascertained his own views. Perhaps it was impossible for him not to do so. When anyone is as deeply convinced as Taylor is about the accuracy of Camus and Sartre’s vision of life, it is hard to hide those convictions from others. Nonetheless, Taylor admits that he has tried to become more hopeful in recent years (he is now a grandfather), even though hope remains elusive for him. He writes: “When hope is authentic,

it hangs by the thin thread of *perhaps*. . . Perhaps there is hope. Perhaps hope is the impossible possibility that helps us go on when everything seems hopeless. Perhaps.”¹² Taylor’s behavior in the classroom communicated this ambiguity—an ambiguity about hope that was both honest and at the same time hesitant enough to allow students to think for themselves.¹³

Taylor’s quandary about how deeply to engage his students is familiar territory for many professors. The kind of unsettling of convictions Taylor describes as having taken place in his classroom is central to the process of liberal education. Criticism of what has been taken for granted is seen as the primary pathway toward both better knowledge about the world and more nuanced and reasonable self-understanding. Most professors are adept at facilitating this kind of questioning. They know how to criticize received wisdom, how to present oppositional views, how to point out contradictions, and how to identify gaps in logic. Scholars not only read texts and analyze events, but they also present alternative interpretations and look for hidden agendas that lie beneath the surface of what people think they know. This in-depth style of inquiry has the potential to challenge students because it raises questions that can reveal the limitations of their existing convictions. Such unsettling may be a prerequisite for personal growth, but there are dangers to this approach and one of them is the threat of despair—from which Taylor wanted to protect his students. Another potential danger is cynicism. The well-educated cynic can analyze every viewpoint and every value and then declare all of them irredeemably flawed. Such an outcome is surely not the desired educational goal, but sometimes cynicism can and does result.

Concerns about cynical outcomes were part of what prompted Wendy Doniger, distinguished professor of Asian religions at the University of Chicago, to give a convocation talk on the topic of “thinking more critically about thinking too critically.” Critical thinking is a good and necessary thing when it has to do with “criticism” understood as the informed judgment of quality, and it also has a legitimate function when “criticism” means pointing out weaknesses and errors. But if criticism only operates in these judgmental and negative modes, it leaves students with very little in the way of constructive foundations. Doniger says that “we need to balance what literary critics call a hermeneutic of suspicion—a method of reading that ferrets out submerged agendas—with a hermeneutic of retrieval or even of reconciliation.” Turning the spotlight of criticism around 180 degrees, Doniger concludes by calling the critics to account: “The purpose of a great liberal education . . . is to free us not only from our own prejudices but from our prejudices about other peoples’ prejudices, to teach us to see through the walls of both our prisons and theirs. . . . Above all, it teaches us not just how to criticize but how to praise.”¹⁴

Praise is a very different mode of reflection than criticism. Sometimes we run into people—from the past, in the present, face to face, or characters from short

stories, novels, and films—who are so genuinely worthy of respect or admiration that they elicit spontaneous praise. Their attitudes and actions, their convictions and courage, are better than our own. They call us to a higher and better way of being human. No one is perfect, everyone has flaws, but the actions and words of some people set the standard higher for everyone. They inspire us to enlarge our souls. When we are lucky enough to run into such people, that experience can sometimes be just as unsettling, in terms of our own convictions, as any form of criticism. They force us to see our own smallness, or more pointedly to *feel* our smallness, our cramped views of others and ourselves, and the narrowness of our thinking. These are moments of “transcendent unsettling,” because they not only challenge our convictions, but also call us toward a better way of being human.

Three Classroom Styles

Parker Palmer, the well-known writer and lecturer on education, says, “Teaching, like any human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.”¹⁵ Teaching is surely much more than simply the projection of a professor’s “soul” onto students in a classroom, but there is more than a grain of truth in what Palmer says. Teachers bring all of who they are into the classroom with them, and that includes their convictions. Becoming aware of one’s own convictions and learning to manage them in the classroom may well be a prerequisite for good teaching.

In general, faculty members assume one of three different strategies for dealing with the issue of their own convictions in the teaching and learning process. Some professors opt for anonymity, trying to hide as much of themselves as possible, other professors try to be transparent, publicly acknowledging their own convictions, and still others engage in advocacy, trying to convince students to adopt the same convictions that they themselves hold. Each of these approaches has its pedagogical strengths and weaknesses.

Anonymity: This first approach seeks, as much as possible, to keep the professor’s own convictions hidden from view. Often, professors have had this style drilled into them in graduate school. They have been told: “Scholarship is not about you, it is about the subject being studied. Be objective and keep yourself out of the picture.” Those who believe that professorial objectivity is possible may consider this to be the only proper way to teach, but even those with less confidence in objectivity can find reasons for adopting this stance. Perhaps the weightiest consideration relates to the fact that the professor is an authority figure in the classroom, and too much professorial self-revelation can cow students into adopting (or at least feigning to have adopted) the same views as the professor. Some students assume that course grades are dependent on agreeing with the professor

on all matters, even when the professor claims otherwise. One student told us quite dramatically: “The classroom is tricky. It is okay to have your own opinion, but that doesn’t mean you have to express it. Professors have to grade you—and that’s something that will affect you for the rest of your life.” By keeping personal convictions out of sight as much as possible, the professor minimizes the pressure to conform and makes space for students to develop their own perspectives and convictions. The problem, of course, is that concealment is never complete. Intentionally or not, the professor’s perspectives leach into the classroom by way of the topics chosen, the approaches taken, and the conclusions drawn.

Transparency: This approach provides an alternative to anonymity, a model that encourages (or even requires) teachers to reveal their personal views. The logic is obvious. Because the convictions of professors inevitably shape the learning experience and introduce bias, the only antidote is to name those convictions (or points of view) so that students can factor them into the learning process. Once the professor’s transparent self-revelation has brought everything into the open, then students are free to debate, reject, or intelligently appropriate the views of the teacher. Although there is significant merit in such an approach, there can also be problems. Very few professors, for example, can explain their convictions in a purely neutral manner, and even fewer can then genuinely invite students to analyze, criticize, and reject those convictions if they so choose. One wise educator asked, “How does a faculty member generate enough courage to disclose parts of her or his inner life in class and also possess enough humility to welcome students’ explorations of alternative perspectives?”¹⁶ The intention of those who adopt the transparency model is to reveal their own convictions in ways that empower others to think for themselves, but that is not always the result. Sometimes transparency can stifle discussion, and sometimes it can become an unacknowledged form of advocacy.

Advocacy: The strength of the advocacy model is its total honesty. A professor following this approach teaches the subject with straightforward passion, with no intention of limiting instruction just to the accepted facts and theories in the field. It’s not just ecology or biology; it’s saving the planet. It’s not about sociological theory; it’s about justice. It’s not about a book; it’s about what constitutes great literature. It isn’t about religion; it’s about life-changing faith or dangerous superstition. The professor’s convictions are projected fully and forcefully into the classroom. There is a place for this kind of teaching in higher education. In fact, the American Association of University Professors says that advocacy is sometimes necessary: “Vigorously to assert a proposition or a viewpoint, however controversial, is to engage in argumentation and discussion—an engagement that lies at the core of academic freedom. Such engagement is necessary if students are to acquire skills of critical independence. The essence of higher education does not lie in the passive transmission of knowledge but in the inculcation of a mature

independence of mind."¹⁷ Yet, most educators also know that unmitigated advocacy has the potential to undercut the hard, often dispassionate work of the academy, which focuses on trying to understand the world on its own terms, without any agenda. Advocacy that never relents may be more likely to force dissenting students into compliant silence (without changing their existing beliefs) than to foster mature independence of mind.

Taken together, the three models of anonymity, transparency, and advocacy represent the full spectrum of pedagogical approaches that professors have available—there really are no other options. These three approaches are not, however, mutually exclusive, and many professors employ the models strategically, varying teaching styles in accordance with particular objectives. Teaching is an art, and it takes creativity and sometimes subterfuge to get the job done. But all three models implicitly acknowledge that the passions and convictions of the teacher cannot be ignored. The professor's personal views must be taken into account, regardless of whether the intention is to minimize or maximize their influence. A professor who makes believe that his or her convictions have no salience for the classroom is living a fantasy.

Mentors and Mentoring Communities

The standard responsibilities of college and university professors have been described as the triumvirate of teaching, research, and institutional service. Increasingly, however, the notion of mentoring is being added to the mix. A mentor is a model and, in that sense, adding mentoring to the list of faculty responsibilities is simply to acknowledge reality; all faculty members are mentors whether they want to be or not. The teaching and learning relationship places educators in the position of being models for students, at least with regard to their fields of expertise and sometimes with regard to life in general.

But the use of the term "mentor" usually signals something more than this. The dictionary definition is "wise and trusted counselor," and mentoring in that sense means that professors are expected to take an active role in molding and shaping students' lives and inspiring them as people. Today, some even go so far as to talk of "the professor as spiritual guide."¹⁸ That kind of language puts many faculty members on edge, because it seems to cross a professional line: A teacher is a teacher, not a guru or spiritual guide.¹⁹ One faculty member told us: "I was not trained as a counselor, and I have no desire to be one. I am an expert in my field and I introduce students to the discipline—something I do very well. But I am not there to hold hands, listen to student stories, and tell them how to live. That's not my job." We have no doubt that this particular educator is an excellent teacher, but the same attitude in a less gifted instructor can produce horrible results. One recent posting by a student on a rating site for professors provides an

extreme example: "If given the option of having Professor X for this class or Satan, I would definitely choose Satan. Satan probably has more of an interest in seeing you succeed in [this class] than X does. He most likely has a better personality as well."²⁰

Most professors have a relationship with students that falls somewhere in the middle, not quite a spiritual guru but certainly better than Satan. In recent years, many disciplines have discouraged old-fashioned "sage on the stage" lecturing strategies and encouraged professors instead to adopt a "guide by the side" posture. Professors are expected not only to be effective classroom teachers, but also to direct independent student research projects and serve as academic advisors for individual students and student organizations. With multiple roles and many occasions for informal interaction, the professor has the opportunity to become not only a mentor, but also a friend. In our campus conversations, however, some students describe their uneasiness with that ideal. One student informed us: "We don't want faculty to be our friends. We don't want to pour our lives out to them either. All we want is someone sometimes to talk to who is older than us, and maybe a little wiser—someone who is a little further down the road and who might have a slightly more mature perspective. That's it, just a little adult conversation now and then."

This student's comment seemed to align with the way most students describe the ideal faculty mentor: someone who once in a while is willing to be a real human being with students and not just a stick-to-the-topic teaching machine. Most students are not looking for immense measures of care, guidance, and hand-holding, but on occasion they would like to take off their student hats and have faculty members take off their professorial hats and then just talk with each other as ordinary people. In such conversations, convictions (of both students and faculty members) will sometimes be evident—these are the ideas and beliefs that define us as persons, so how could they not?—but they will not necessarily be the focus. More likely, convictions will season the conversation like spice in a meal: Spices make a meal richer in flavor, but if they are all you taste, then the seasoning has been overdone.

Taking this culinary image a step further, a well-seasoned dish usually has a variety of spices in it, and students too need a variety of mentors. The goal is not for any one faculty member to be the sole mentor of anyone. Instead, good colleges and universities are mentoring communities,²¹ where different kinds of people provide a wide range of models and mentors for students to seek out or serendipitously encounter during their years of study. These influential "others" may not be professors, but rather students who have similar questions and passions—or wondrous students who have very dissimilar questions and eye-opening passions. In a wonderful short essay, thirty-something novelist Salvatore Scibona describes how his life was changed by his experience at a small liberal arts college: "It was akin to

taking holy orders, but . . . in place of praying, you read." Remembering how he gathered with his friends to parse the meaning of the opaque texts comprising his school's Great Books program, he confides, "The gravity of the whole thing would have been laughable if it hadn't been so much fun, and if it hadn't been such a gift to find my tribe."²²

Finding one's tribe—that group of people with whom one can feel totally oneself and at home—is indeed an exhilarating experience, and it has a lot to do with shared convictions. Too much overlap in group convictions can, however, short-circuit the need to ever rethink anything, because everyone just reinforces each other. Higher education at its best allows students to find their tribes without becoming unhealthily tribal. It starts students on a lifelong journey of discovering their convictions and examining those convictions, by themselves and in conversation with others, to see if and how they might need to be reconsidered. That quest is simultaneously spiritual and intellectual. It is a matter of the head, but it is also a matter of the heart, and it can be immensely beneficial for both individuals and society. For individuals, an examination of convictions keeps learning alive and allows growth as persons. For society, it is an antidote to fanaticism, but it still allows passions to flower. If one of the implicit goals of every institution of higher education is to help students become dedicated lifelong learners, the interplay of convictions and knowledge (of formation and information) will be a central concern.

Character and Vocation

How might colleges and universities point students toward lives of meaning and purpose?

STEVE JOBS, THE late CEO of Apple Computers and Pixar Animations, gave the commencement address at Stanford University in 2005. The fourteen-minute talk, like all good commencement speeches, was short and to the point, and this was his advice: "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become." What Jobs was telling his graduating audience that day was simple and straightforward. Meaning and purpose matter. You only get one life, so make it your own. Find out what *you* love—find out what you are called to do, what perhaps you and you alone can do—and do it. He concluded: "Everything else is secondary."²³

It would be hard to find a more succinct description of personal religious practice, which centers on what a person genuinely trusts in, hopes for, and values above all else. It is the pattern of behavior that constitutes individual identity what gives direction and meaning to life. Sometimes an individual's personal religion is significantly informed by historic religion (by Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, or some other tradition), but often personal religion has nothing to do with historic religion. It is what provides identity, grounding, meaning, and purpose to an individual; it is what makes life really worth living; and, to use Jobs's language, it is what makes everything else secondary by comparison.