

Seeing the Possibilities: Doing the Common in Uncommon Ways

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Our branding theme this year is *“Possibility Happens Here.”* You will find the Scriptures from Matthew 19:26 accompanying our communications about possibilities. Jesus says: “with God all things are possible.” So, this year we are looking forward to expanding the possibilities for our students and growing our engagement in Fresno and the Central Valley.

Years ago, I came across a saying by George Washington Carver while reading one of his biographies. One author quoted him to say: *“When you do the common things in life in an uncommon way, you will command the attention of the world.”* Voltaire said: “common sense is not so common.” We often think of the uncommon as innovative and distinctively different. Maybe in some instances, doing the common with common sense becomes the uncommon way of doing things.

Carver awakened each morning looking for new possibilities in the use of the peanut and sweet potatoes. It is reported that he discovered over 300 uses of the peanut and over 110 uses of the sweet potatoes. How the world would change if we arose each morning anticipating new possibilities. As Alice in Wonderland said: “sometimes I believe in as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” To do the common in uncommon ways, means living a life of possibilities.

Fresno Pacific University is a community of thoughts, ideas, text and context. Learning incubates in the realm of words spoken, read or contemplated, but it comes alive when given to actions. How do we adjust our thinking, mature our skills to take creative actions, now, that will influence the generations to come? As a Christian prophetic university, or as some would call, a social innovative university, we coined a phrase to describe the future of our learning context: **Engaging the cultures and serving the cities**. The limits to this kind of education is only bound by the limitations we set on cultures and the life of the cities that surround us.

So, how do we become a spiritually vibrant, socially innovative university of academic excellence? How do we stretch ourselves to greater possibilities? How do we take the familiar and re-frame our thinking to see the invisible and do what some say is impossible?

We start this journey by examining ourselves, finding congruence between our mission, values and the vision we have for our students *to extend the influence of the kingdom of God in their lives and communities*.

I understand that in the last census, the San Joaquin Valley was identified as the western Appalachia. We live in a place which mirrors so many of the needs in the world. Our Valley is a living laboratory, a place to awaken our faith and a context to nurture what Albert Einstein called a “holy curiosity.” We live in a place where culture serves as the lenses in which we view ourselves, our potential and our futures. Culture defines our relationships and the nature of our collective work. It can serve as an asset or impediment in collaborative problem-solving; a skill which most universities boast they prepare in students.

So how do we as a university take the common and reframe it in uncommon ways to more effectively elevate learning? How do we contextualize our learning to **Engage the cultures and serve the cities**? I would suggest three “disruptive strategies” as a guide for doing the common in an uncommon way.

They are: **encouraging a self-less passion for learning; empowering a spirit of reconciliation and peace-making; and inspiring courageous innovation**. Passion, reconciliation and courage are not new to our

community, and do not negate what individuals or small groups are already doing. But it is not common for these principles to be intentionally pervasive in our work, outreach and learning environment.

Let's take a brief look at the three stratagems:

Stratagem One: Encouraging a self-less passion for learning

We have traditionally viewed ourselves as a compassionate community. The university has supported undocumented students for almost two decades, when others were not considering the matter. Fifty-four percent of our traditional undergraduates' students come from families with incomes of less than \$40,000 per year. We are committed to serving first-generation and underserved populations. Just recently several of our first-year students shared with me their pleasant surprise about the support and caring received from staff and faculty. There has always been a general sense of community, and caring as part of the ethos of this community.

I would suggest that we infuse our compassionate environment with a *selfless passion for learning* which encourages loving God with our minds. The love of God is the place where wisdom and knowledge coalesce. As the Book of Proverbs states: "Wisdom is the principle thing." Both wisdom and knowledge begin with a reverence and pursuit of God (Proverbs). We talk about the integration of faith and learning, more as a burdensome task, rather than seeing this process as an incubation for wisdom.

What better way to broaden our thinking than to combine theory and praxis in the service of others, driven by a passion for learning more about God and his creation. Here is where we stretch ourselves in science, health care, education, the arts and humanities, business and the social sciences, not for our own gain, but for the love of God and the dignity of others. A selfless passion for learning grows out of the quest for wisdom, and in the pursuit of God.

Mother Theresa is one of my favorite icons of faith. Her pursuit of God gave her a passion for the poorest of the poor. She once said: "We can't all do great things, but we can do small things with great love." The wisdom of love drove her to think differently about a population most people ignored. I identify her as a great social innovator because she took the common and served in an uncommon way because her passion for learning (wisdom) came from her pursuit of God.

Stratagem Two: Empowering a spirit of reconciliation and peace-making

In his book *In Search of Community*, Ernest Boyer outlined six principles that should be characteristic of learning communities. He wrote: "These are places where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity becomes a goal." He calls justice as one of the "most urgent obligation of a learning community." We have viewed reconciliation and peacemaking as integral parts of a just community.

We are a diverse community that honors the cultures and traditions that are consistent with our biblical context. As a just community, we have always respected and welcomed all students who desired to be part of this community, even those who are initially not interested in any faith dialogue. We would like to believe that reconciliation and peacemaking is practiced in our diversity.

Biblical justice is established to yield peace in a community. It's administration sometimes brings about reconciliation, forgiveness and resolution to conflict in relationships. From a biblical perspective, this grace of God is never defined as retribution, but restoration of order and peace. Think about the difference it would make on campus and in the region, if our graduates are released into the world with the skills of peacemakers and reconcilers. Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers." We currently have difficulty identifying the peacemakers in our country, in a time when divisiveness is almost becoming the norm. We yearn to see more peace among us.

Can we be intentional or creative about advancing this type of learning environment, where diversity is celebrated, victimization is healed and conflict is not avoided, but cordially reconciled? Where teams of faculty and students are serving throughout the Valley working with education, business, healthcare and even in the arts to assist facilitation of conciliatory dialogue. Here we take something that is common among us (justice) and reframe it as a skill and student learning outcomes which facilitates peace and reconciliation in the home and workplace. The work of peacemaking and reconciliation changes our view of adversaries.

Nelson Mandela combined his faith with justice which yielded reconciliation, forgiveness and restoration in a country full of turmoil. His objective was peace between the races even though he had been a victim of prejudice. Mandela said: "Peace is the greatest weapon for development that any person can have." He also said: "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." Can we be known as the learning community that assist adversaries to become partners in addressing salient issues that impact our communities? In our society characterized by divisiveness; learning this skill is certainly uncommon education.

Stratagem Three: Inspiring courageous innovation.

Courage is one characteristic that has not been so evident in higher education. We teach change, but as corporate bodies, we fear making change, because change is disruptive, uncomfortable and sometimes perturbing. We fear one another, which results in lack of trust, battles for power in decision-making and alienation to collaborative processes. We fear engaging in innovation, because it risks failure, criticism and stretches us beyond our perceived limitations.

The Scriptures tell us that perfect love casts out all fear, because fear has torment. Proverbs encourages us to "Trust the Lord with all our hearts"—our buffer from fear. Yet much of our life and time is nurtured in our fears, with torrents of doubts which challenge what we think is possible. We slowly lose our sense of possibilities and develop rational arguments to justify our places of mediocracy. We dare not dream for fear of being disappointed.

People often ask Yvette and I if we were afraid during our time serving in Pakistan. Our response has been that our confidence in the call and presence of God was a buffer from fear. As the Psalmist stated: "what do I have to fear if God is with me." King David writes: "I will not fear what man can do to me, because God is with me".

How do we find new possibilities among us if our community is fraught with fear? We do it through awakening ourselves to what Jesus said: "with man it might be impossible, but with God all things are possible." Our major obstacle to the possibilities that are mapped out before us is our fear. Why are we so afraid to dream?

Martin Luther King said: "Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles; cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creativity; cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it. Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right."

What is right for FPU in its future? To become a self-less passionate, peace-driven, reconciling, courageous learning community in the San Joaquin Valley. A learning community that **Engages the Cultures and Serves the Cities.**

Many of you may question my common sense. But I would ask you: what is God doing when he brings an African American couple from Asia, to serve at a Christian Hispanic Serving institution in a part of California not known to us? Maybe God is preparing us all for an uncommon journey of faith. A journey filled with a passion for learning that leads to wisdom, a journey where justice is applied as peacemaking, and a journey where innovation is confronted with indefatigable courage. It is on this pathway that we will: **Engage the Cultures and Serve the Cities.**

THANK YOU