

Dayton Is a Place

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I. Introduction

It is a privilege to be asked to give the third annual College of Arts and Sciences Catholic and Marianist Education lecture. I first came to UD as a freshman in 1978, returned ABD in 1986, and—in a series of coincidences that make it difficult for me to give anyone advice about plotting out a rational career path—have been here ever since. And pretty much ever since I have been here I have been involved in thinking and writing (and meeting and talking and eating and singing and just about everything except dancing) about the University's Catholic and Marianist character. Which means my biggest challenge today is to try to come up with something I haven't said before—but don't get your hopes up too high on that score.

My most recent experience of sustained conversation on Catholic and Marianist education (and one of the most collegial and personally satisfying) was last year's work on the Marianist Education Working Group. Within minutes after we submitted our report, "Habits of Inquiry," I wisely escaped into a year's sabbatical, and have been observing subsequent events from a safe distance. I think one of the highest compliments that can be paid to a committee report is that it cause a ruckus. It suggests that the audience understands something meaningful to be at stake. And so I can say genuinely (and it took only eleven and a half months of sabbatical to get me to the point where I can say this) that I look forward to being more active once again in the process of moving ahead with the report's recommendations.

If what I say today makes good sense to you or seems at all useful, the credit goes to my colleagues on the working group and elsewhere who have helped me to think about these things. If what I say does *not* seem sensible or useful, I will selfishly keep all the credit for myself. At some point in any process like that in which the working group engaged, someone not on the committee will ask—haven't we talked about all this a hundred times before? Is anything useful going to happen this time, or are you just going to write a report and put it on the shelf? Well, since I am a historian, I am always profoundly grateful to *anyone* who writes something down and puts it on a shelf. The more mundane

and obvious, the better, since a remarkably short period of time has to pass before what is obvious to a group of people in a given place and time is irretrievably lost.

I would like today to make an argument about what I think we have been given as our place and time. I will then propose that, as good Marianist educators, we have the obligation to think deeply and creatively about our response to the particularities of that place and time. I hope in the end to make the case that, far from fostering provincialism or insularity, such a response could open up our enterprise in ways we have not yet imagined.

II. What is a place?

I intend the referent of my title “Dayton Is a Place,” to be ambiguous—that is, to refer to both the city of Dayton and to the University of Dayton. So, first, some words on what I am trying to convey by using the idea of place as a framework for my talk. I am not going to spend a lot of definitional energy here, because I am not trying to be definitive. But the idea I have been puzzling over is very simple and, at the same time, at least to me, very mysterious. Place is very elemental and intimate in the sense that it is where we are attached to the planet. Other places exist, and if you go there, there you are. You can only be in one of them at once. I don’t mean this to sound cutesy or deliberately abstruse, but to convey my own sense of how this notion becomes more complex the more I think about it. It also seems to me that universities have a distinctive relationship to place—very few social institutions, especially in the United States, are and have been associated with the same pieces of ground for as long as many universities. UD has been inhabiting the same piece of ground for just seven fewer years than the oldest graves in Woodland Cemetery. Does any of this matter? It can, I think, and should, if we attend to the deep particularities of this place with which we may think we are so familiar that we have stopped seeing it.

I am aware that my notion of place comes largely from the experience of being from a place which most other people consider not to be a place, a small town in what is commonly referred to as the Rust Belt. When I left my hometown and began traveling and living elsewhere, I encountered this attitude in its generic form (I was from the middle of nowhere, from the Great Void, from flyover country). But the presumption that my hometown was really not a place also appeared in highly rationalized and elaborated versions. I found myself in the middle of arguments in which I was refused permission to criticize the cataclysmic wave of deindustrialization that beginning in the 1970s had shattered so many of the communities in a great swath of the northern half of the country’s midsection. Admission to the social circles or discourse communities or professional classes (call them whatever you want) with which I was becoming associated was premised on accepting that this destruction was necessary, that it was for the greater good, that if these people had not insisted for so long on demanding so much in the way of wages and benefits then their employers might not have been forced to transfer their jobs elsewhere, where fewer workers were so misguided as to believe they

deserved to live securely and with dignity. I was to be required to believe that this was all for the best, and that to imagine there could be a way of organizing human exchange relationships that did not require the regular and systematic decimation of human communities was to be at best naive and at worst a communist. I submit that you cannot deploy this rationale against somewhere that you actually consider to be a place.

I acquired a context for thinking about this insight in a more scholarly (and less blindly angry) way in my field of American Studies. It became clear to me that when a disciplined and generous mind turned its attention to even the smallest and apparently most insignificant of places, virtually every kind of human complexity and connection emerged almost instantaneously. So Rich Horwitz could see in an Iowa hog farm (on which he has worked part-time for twenty years while a professor of American Studies at the University of Iowa) a complex web of meaning stretching from, as his subtitle puts it, manure to mortality. And folklorist Henry Glassie could write a 900-page book about a town in the north of Ireland with fewer than 200 inhabitants, and make clear that 900 pages wasn't nearly enough to tell you everything there was to know about this town.¹

This combination of personal and scholarly autobiography is intended to establish two of my main points here: first, that what is at stake in thinking of a place as a place is very high. Second, that beginning to see a place as a place is a dangerous undertaking, because then I must attend to human flourishing in that place, and I must apply whatever expertise I possess to cultivating that flourishing to the best of my ability.

III. Place and modernity

Now, a third point about place: we face particular obstacles in thinking about it under the condition of modernity, a condition in which we all, more or less inescapably, live. I am taking as my text in this section the words of someone whom I suspect was not inspired by Father Chaminade (though I doubt anyone has really done the archival work to establish this definitively), Chou Enlai. When he was asked by somebody (some accounts say a reporter, some say Henry Kissinger; there seems to be general agreement that some version of the exchange took place but no clear documentation of it) in the 1970s what he thought were the most important effects of the French Revolution, Chou replied that it was too early to say.

I have loved this answer since the first time I heard it—it is so instructive to Americans in our tendency to act as though anything older than the internet is too ancient to be relevant, and to assume that the arc of progress from 1776 to the present is transparent in its meaning and effect. What I take Zhou's observation to illustrate is this: the French Revolution stands for the great shift in society/world history away from traditionally-ordered, agriculturally-based societies toward what we call by the indispensable but

¹ Richard P. Horwitz, *Hog Ties: Pigs, Manure, and Mortality in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Henry H. Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

infuriatingly amorphous term “modernity.” I am working with a fairly pragmatic definition of modernity—the presumption that the social order is the result of human choices, not divine decree; the accompanying shift to constitutional representative government in place of hereditary monarchies; the spread of capitalism and eventually industrialization and—importantly—the presumption that the benefits of the one are the benefits of the other, that they are inherently compatible and uniquely suited to each other. There are as many patterns and pathways to modernity as there are societies, but one common element is how the transportation and communications revolutions have “annihilated” distance, have allowed us to think we know many places, not just the ones in which we spend most of our time. They give us the illusion of attachment to places in which we do not live and lead, perhaps, to our being often unable to see the places in which we do live.

Further, members of the middle class have a great deal at stake emotionally and psychologically in becoming attached to place, since a requirement for membership in the class, and certainly for any ambitions toward upward mobility, is an entire willingness to be detached from a place at a moment’s notice and transplanted to wherever the scholarship or the job offer or the promotion takes you. This tendency is perhaps even more pronounced among university faculty, who not only must take a job wherever it is offered, but who face a great deal of ambivalence in becoming attached to a place when the tenure process makes their connection officially tenuous for seven long years after their arrival.

All of this contributes to a tendency to think about what we do here, especially what we include in our curriculum, in terms that take places other than our own as reference points. We cede part of our authority over our curriculum—that sacred trust that belongs to the faculty, though often we don’t seem to want it much—to fashion, and to professional associations, and to accrediting boards, and to colleagues at institutions with higher levels of prestige in bigger cities closer to the coasts. I submit that if we think deeply and creatively about Dayton—the city and the university—as a place, we will find resources not just for curricular revision but for curricular rejuvenation, curricular invigoration. If we want it. And one of the greatest models and companions in this thinking are the Marianists.

IV. The Marianists, modernity, and responding in the here and now

As a historian, I think one illuminating way to conceive of the Marianist project and mission is as a response to modernity. Faced with the upheaval of a thousand-year-old social order, the early Marianists responded by imagining new structures and new relationships that would preserve the Church in a way true to tradition but also in a way that met the needs of the people of the time and place in which they found themselves. Their response was immediate and local, but it had historic and global implications and effects that are still reverberating. Their response featured a willingness to see society anew, to transgress long-accepted boundaries in the service of mission, to link religious

faith and devotion with practical address to their society's most pressing needs. The process was not an easy or uncontested one—no one who reads the story of Father Chaminade's last years, or of Leo Meyer's years in Dayton can be very starry-eyed about what it means to agree to participate in this mission. But that, too, can help stiffen our spines as we think about what our place and our time are saying to us about what we should teach our students.

To a degree we probably seldom appreciate fully, Dayton was for much of the twentieth century integral, for better and for worse, to some of the greatest transformations in American life. Contemplate for a moment how profoundly Dayton as a place was shaped by precisely those technologies that have most disconnected us from place—the airplane and the automobile. Add to that the extent to which the consumer revolution, which transformed American society from the level of landscape to the level of individual consciousness, was touched at virtually every point for most of the century by machines made literally within sight of where we are standing. Consider the combination of incentive and compulsion that drew both black and white workers from the south and entrenched the near-total segregation in housing that still shapes the city today. Think about the alliance of engineering expertise, Progressive-era government and corporate far-sightedness that enabled the creation in the aftermath of the great flood of 1913 of a flood-control system on which we still depend. It is difficult to find a single major phenomenon of the past century within which Dayton did not have some significant influence. I say this not to invoke some day of past glory, but to make the point that, as my mentors in American Studies helped me to see decades ago, digging deeply into any place immediately connects you to many other places, maybe to every other place. We have no need to fear parochialism or provincialism if we take more seriously our own place as a starting point for a renewed sense of curricular inspiration.

It is somewhat more difficult to make an argument about Dayton's central importance today than it might have been forty years ago, but I would like to propose that in that difficulty lie our greatest potential opportunities. The very things that shaped Dayton as a place also made it vulnerable to the radical disconnection from place that capital enjoys, so when capital began its great shift away from Dayton in the 1970s, the city suffered a series of shocks from which it has not yet recovered. If we were to look, as scholars and teachers but also as Marianists, at Dayton today, with the eyes of Chaminade, Adele and Marie Therese, what responses might we make? What might we see as the deepest human needs, needs to which we can lend (even more mindfully and intentionally and collaboratively than we already do) the enormous expertise and energy that exist in this room and on this campus? Historians get drummed out of the union if they predict the future, but I'm going to venture a couple of possibilities that I think we could build into commitments that would help us to be a premier institution for all the right reasons. I'm not claiming any originality or special insight—most of these things appear in the pages of the *New York Times* within the past week. That doesn't make their serious pursuit any less radically potentially transformative, however.

Issues of ecology and sustainability are not going to become any less important in any of our lifetimes. It is entirely likely that extending what we think of as the most indispensable comforts the modern world has to offer—automobile ownership and the highways essential to it, and air conditioning, to name just two—to the developing world will be enough to destroy the planet. We live in the most highly militarized society in the history of the world, and we are deeply, deeply enmeshed in what that radical leftist Dwight Eisenhower warned us against, the military-industrial complex. We are still capable of destroying the planet many times over through the use of nuclear weaponry, and virtually all of the human and technological structures that can keep that from happening (and, if the possibility is not yet beyond imagination, even eliminate the weapons altogether) have suffered from severe neglect and outright sabotage in the last generation. We live in a society where race is still the most reliable predictor of a lower quality of life. I submit that on each of these issues we here in Dayton have a special obligation to cultivate the imaginations of our students in such a way that they understand how desperately the world needs them.

That word obligation is a fraught one, I realize, and I want to be clear that I'm trying to use it in a way that's entirely consonant with what we commit ourselves to when we pledge academic freedom. But it's a word I've thought a lot about, along with some of its etymological cousins. An obligation is something we do on account of the ties we have. If we believe that place is not just something we touch down in, something we find the nearest Starbucks in, but instead something we attempt to inhabit fully, something that both sustains and makes claims on us, then we have obligations to it. Not dry and unfulfilling obligations, but lifegiving and energizing opportunities to dive deep down into meaning and experience in ways that will push us to the frontiers of our disciplines and our profession before we know where we are.

When I say that our primary task is to cultivate the imaginations of our students, that may seem like an airy-fairy humanities way of describing things, but I do not see it that way. It is precisely at the level of imagination that the most powerful and dramatic change originates. It takes an enormously deft imagination to grasp how the opaque and deliberately obscured structures that protect power and justify inequality in our country and our world operate, and it takes imagination fueled by courage to conceive of the means by which to confront these structures and bring about genuine transformation in the service of human flourishing. It takes an almost heroic imagination to contemplate a vibrant future for a shattered post-industrial city, a future that does not depend on building faux downtowns in the far reaches of suburbia. What if we imagined (maybe we already are imagining) on the land that stretches between here and the river locally-owned enterprises, designed specially to experiment with new possibilities on which a lively post-industrial economy and culture might be based? What if we drew on the Marianists' worldwide connections to sell items made by people with whom Marianists around the world work, to use the relative wealth of even our struggling city to enable practical collaboration with people in areas less economically advantaged? What if we

saw it as a powerful meeting point for the disparate communities of UD, South Park, Rubicon, Fairgrounds, West Stewart Street and Oakwood and somehow created physical spaces—inviting, beautiful spaces, within which people usually rigidly separated by cars and rivers and invisible but insurmountable boundaries could regularly and naturally interact? What if, as a College, we asked what knowledge and skills our students might need to undertake such a re-imagining of the future, and made that a starting point for what we think a General Education ought to consist of? If we want prominence *and* transformation, we could have it—my only real uncertainty is whether we really want it. I am curious, very, to find out the answer to that question in the next few years.

Some of you may be wondering, with some justification, what all this has to do with the Catholic and Marianist part of the Catholic and Marianist Education lecture. I have a minimalist and a maximalist answer to this question. Minimally, a Catholic university thinking deeply about place will have a special responsibility to see the Catholics in the landscape. Religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, is often left out of general histories. Our version of the fidelity to our evidence that we honor as scholars and teachers would attend to remedying this absence where we find it. I am aware that even this would not be an uncontroverted commitment, since Catholicism so stubbornly remains a tradition that prizes knowledge, and we have difficult conversations and decisions ahead about whether our students truly encounter that knowledge here at UD unless they are exceptionally motivated to seek it out even before they come to us. We need to find a way to foster that knowledge while still honoring the desire to expand the circle of collaborators as widely as possible, to include all people of good will, to be much more inclined to leave the wheat and tares to grow together until we are very, very sure we know where the harvest will be found.

But, if from one angle this close focus on place seems like a secular end run around contested questions of the University's founding religious commitments, let me say head on that I have spent so much time thinking about it, and taken up so much of your time talking about it, because I think, simply, God is here, and we need to pay attention. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in one of his most famous poems, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God"—an image laden with modernity, a poet who saw and felt the anguish of industrial suffering firsthand nonetheless linking the wonder of electricity with the wonder of the incarnation, that still startlingly bizarre Christian doctrine that God became human in a place that was certainly part of the flyover country of the Roman Empire. If we believe that God is here, that, as Flannery O'Connor (who could also tell us something about place) said, the world in all its horror has been found by God to be worth dying for, how can we not be about transformation? How can we not be in agony over the needless suffering of others? How can we not be impassioned to awaken in our students—and allow them to awaken in us—the capacity to stand in awe before the wonders of the world? How can we not be driven to help our students see how desperately the world needs them?

I am very much aware that I could be accused of, from the leisured perspective of sabbatical, attempting to bind up heavy burdens and placing them on other people's shoulders. I have learned over the years to treasure the confluence of the academic year's end with this period between Easter and Pentecost, when Christians pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. I hope that the spirit who in the final lines of Hopkins' poem "over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings" accompanies you through the work of the weeks ahead and into the creative leisure of summer. Thank you very much.