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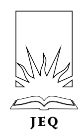

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Special Section: Cura Psychologia: Jesuit Education and the Work between Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology

Cura Anxietatis: Jesuit Education as Holding Environment

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ABSTRACT

This article takes as core premises that anxiety is intrinsic to the human condition; that it is manifested in multiple forms, pathological as well as formative; and that it is imperative to fashion educational environments that help curtail its more destructive features and strengthen its creative, life affirming ones. Of special concern are the ways in which neoliberal pressures, social media, and institutional structures foment potentially harmful forms of anxiety in contemporary college students and how these may appropriately be addressed through the educational process. Drawing on the College of the Holy Cross mission statement as well as courses offered by each of the authors, the article provides a range of pedagogical strategies for helping to transform anxiety from a debilitating force into a valuable site for intellectual, personal, and spiritual growth.

Keywords:
anxiety; formation; freedom; holding environment; social media

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These are difficult times for the mental—and spiritual—health of our students. Numerous studies confirm this. A recent survey carried out by the American College Health Association of some 33,000 undergraduates indicated that 78% of surveyed students had experienced moderate or high stress levels within the last 30 days; 49% met the criteria for experiencing loneliness; 27% met the criteria for suicidal ideation while 3% reported attempting suicide in the past year; and 12% had intentionally injured themselves in the past year.[1] This survey also reported that 35% of students had been diagnosed with anxiety and 25% with depression, and that a wide range of other disorders—trauma and stress-related disorders (such as posttraumatic stress disorder) and eating disorders, and the like—had also been diagnosed. Causative factors included academic pressure, isolation, harassment, discrimination, and more.

Other studies have shown comparable results and have also noted that the incidence of these phenomena has increased radically in recent years. Indeed, according to one article published by the National Education Association, "The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses," "rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation on college campuses have never been higher" and consequently "faculty and staff are overwhelmed."[2] If there is some good news to this alarming picture, it is that students seem to be seeking more help than in the past."[3] But this is hardly cause for consolation.

Our main focus in this article is anxiety. By all indications, COVID is partly responsible for the increased incidence of anxiety on campus. Social media is too. Surely other factors—the horrors of contemporary politics, school shootings, climate catastrophes, the still-abysmal treatment of Black citizens, and more—enter the picture. The consequences of these are also difficult to specify with any precision (and for some students may be quite irrelevant). In any case, and putting aside the overtly pathological forms of anxiety best addressed by clinicians, we are left with more "ordinary" forms—forms that somehow seep into the souls of young people, often leaving them feeling overwhelmed, frightened, and alone.

How might we, as educators, stem the tide of the debilitating and demoralizing problems so many college students are facing? Acute forms of anxiety obviously should be handled by mental health professionals.

1 American College Health Association, *ACHA III: Undergraduate Student Reference Data Report, Fall 2024* (American College Health Association, 2024).

2 Mary Ellen Flannery, "The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses," *NEA Today*, March 29, 2023.

3 Johanna Alonso, "Student Mental Health Worsens, But More Are Seeking Help," *Inside Higher Education*, March 16, 2023.

Commonplace forms prevalent on college campuses, however, ought not to be addressed by counselors and clinicians alone. Alongside the fact that college counseling centers are often overburdened by the sheer volume of students' needs, the problems at hand are not just psychological but also *ontological*—having to do with human *being* in its developmental, historical, cultural, social, and spiritual profiles. Addressing such problems thus goes well beyond the purview of this or that psychological treatment or intervention, valuable though it may be. This in turn suggests that it falls upon those of us who educate students to address and possibly ameliorate such problems—not as surrogate therapists but as people dedicated to personal formation.

We take as one fundamental premise that anxiety is unavoidable. Anxiety is part and parcel of human existence. Another fundamental premise is that anxiety is not inherently, or necessarily, "bad," something to be disposed of. It can be—we know that—but we also take it to be intimately tied to consciousness and freedom. The Jesuit approach to education assumes that human persons are fundamentally open to reality, which is why we believe in education in the first place: truth and goodness are real and people can access them, although (at least initially) they need guidance and support in doing so. This fundamental openness to reality entails—and here's the anxiety-inducing thought—the risk of venturing into an infinite search for meaning. One of the best things we can do as educators is to expose students to the sheer infinity of all that is out there to understand, to know, and to love. But this blessing is also a curse; infinity overwhelms. It can make them, as it does us, anxious.

Given that this is so, we believe it important for anxiety to be cultivated, nurtured, and supported in and through the very education we provide. In addition to being a problem, as the studies we cited at the beginning show, anxiety can be positive as long as it's properly channeled. By *educating* anxiety, it may be possible to replace some of its more debilitating forms with more formative, growth-oriented ones.

We stand convinced that those of us fortunate enough to work as educators in Jesuit institutions are distinctively situated to assist young people with their mental health challenges—or, to use the idiom of the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, to accompany young people through their anxiety in the creation of a hope-filled future.[4] Jesuit education is not a panacea, able to wipe away the maladies and pathologies of the present day. And Jesuit institutions are not the only ones that rise to the occasion. But those such as our own have *built within them* valuable char-

4 Curia Generalizia della Compagnia di Gesù, "Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, 2019–2029," June 2019, https://www.jesuits.global/uap/.

acteristics able to speak cogently to problems and promises bearing on the phenomenon of anxiety. In this three-part article, we reflect on the challenges our students face with regard to anxiety and how we educators both stoke and might redirect that anxiety positively. We then meditate on the mission statement of our home institution, the College of the Holy Cross, in order to lay out how, at the level of principle, we can accompany young people in hope through their travails. Last, we discuss three courses that we have taught (one each) that aimed to channel students' anxiety toward creativity and freedom. With these three points of discussion, we describe Jesuit education, using language borrowed from the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, as a "holding environment," a place to encourage, support, and sustain growth amid anxiety.[5]

The Experiential Landscape

Our students often suffer from their own success.[6] Had they not faced numerous demands—academic, athletic, social, and religious—and not achieved in all these registers, they would not find themselves at venerable Jesuit institutions. We see all too frequently, however, that achievement does not inoculate them from feeling overwhelmed by an unmanageable array of tasks and pressures. Even worse, lurking in the background of observable demands are imagined or constructed demands, including internal ones, bound up with students' own wishes, goals, and expectations. Holy Cross students seem particularly prone to the need to "do it all" and, of course, to do it well. As a highly selective college (the acceptance rate for the class of 2029 was 17%), Holy Cross tends to be a pressure cooker. It reflects and contributes to a fiercely competitive society that seems to insist that, in order to "make it"—as a high school student who wants to go to college, as a college student who wants to go to graduate school or join the work world, and so on down the line—one must be better than the next person, in terms of GPAs, SATs, GREs, MCATs, LSATs; athletics; extracurricular activities; community service; and honors and awards. Our students feel perpetually behind, no matter how far their early lives have

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5 Among the many writings in which Winnicott addresses the idea of the holding environment is his collection of essays *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (Routledge, [1965] 2018).

6 We should clarify that the vast majority of Holy Cross students are conventional-age college students (18–22 years old) and that 93% of them live on campus, with numerous others living in proximity and with precious few traditional commuters. For these reasons, we do not think that Holy Cross provides a reliable cross-section of college student experiences. That said, we believe the concrete experiences of this type of population can provide some data and insights among the diverse experiences across Jesuit institutions.

launched them ahead. For many, an ethic of relentless achievement can be debilitating. This is especially true for the student who stood at the head of her high school class only to find that at Holy Cross she runs in the middle of the pack.

Ours is a liberal arts college, where we encourage intellectual and creative exploration and experimentation. Officially, every student enters Holy Cross undeclared and may not declare a major until February of the first year (about six months into a student's time at the college). The freedom that we aim to allow students, though, provokes anxiety. Since students are used to crushing demands and pressures, which had previously led them in a specific direction (get into the best possible university!), to experience even a modicum of indirection (you can go whichever way you wish) can produce vertigo. Students just beginning their first year already ask (implicitly or explicitly) what, specifically, they're preparing for, how they'll fulfill their obligations to their parents or whoever else is funding their education, whether they'll be saddled with unpayable debt, whether the "outside world" will have a place and role for them. Anxiety looms.

Students may have always felt such anxiety, but our experiences advising, teaching, and mentoring them leads us to believe that today they feel it even more intensely. As noted earlier, the pandemic surely exacerbated their anxiety and their sense of isolation from others. We should also reference our students' much greater reliance, or *dependency*, on technology—Zoom, smartphones, social media, and so on—as well as an increasingly fraught social, cultural, and political world. Our students became part of what Jonathan Haidt has called the anxious generation, unwitting victims of the "great rewiring" of childhood and, in turn, an "epidemic of mental illness."[7]

Acknowledging that some forms of anxiety and depression deserve the label, it's not clear that framing this phenomenon as "mental illness" is the way to go. In fact, it may serve to diminish our awareness of the very forces—social, cultural, political, economic, technological—that have led to this dreadfully anxious situation. But there is no denying its severity.

Haidt offers his book to contribute to parents', caregivers', and educators' understanding of "how the most rapid rewiring of human relationships and consciousness in human history has made it harder for all of us to think, focus, forget ourselves enough to care about others, and build close relationships."[8] As he notes, the main disorders of concern, anxiety and depression, are "classed together in the psychiatric category known as

7 Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin, 2024).

8 Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 17.

internalizing disorders. . . . The person with an internalizing disorder feels emotions such as anxiety, fear, sadness, and hopelessness. They ruminate. They often withdraw from social engagement."[9] We balk at relegating these phenomena to a psychiatric category, but we find persuasive Haidt's claim that young people today seem to be driven in frightening numbers and degrees toward rumination and withdrawal.

If technological forms of communication are having these detrimental effects, so too are the kinds of content that they deliver. "Social media," Haidt continues, is "a fountain of bedevilments. It trains people to think in ways that are exactly contrary to the world's wisdom traditions: *Think about yourself first; be materialistic, judgmental, boastful, and petty; seek glory as quantified by likes and followers.*"[10] Places like Holy Cross and other Jesuit institutions seek to form young people into "persons for and with others." Social media content such as Haidt (accurately) depicts it militates against such a virtuous way of life. We'll permit him one more comment: "Growing up in the virtual world promotes anxiety, anomie, and loneliness. The Great Rewiring of Childhood, from play-based to phone-based, has been a catastrophic failure."[11] As we've suggested, this failure contrasts with particular sharpness against the aims we have for our students at Jesuit institutions.

Haidt's words are strong and largely persuasive, but not entirely satisfactory. Without question, the virtual world has exacerbated the maladies he addresses. But even absent the baneful effects of social media, our students will likely still experience intense anxiety. We cannot help but think that, as Wordsworth said long ago, "the world is too much with us" and that students, some at any rate, feel this acutely—even if they find it difficult to put into words. The virtual world causes anxiety, but the analog world does too. It's not a stretch to say that the world has become a major source of anxiety in itself: inscrutable, unpredictable, and potentially paralyzing.

None of this means that anxiety, in its many forms, is to always be diminished or disposed of, which would be impossible in any case. There can be "good" anxiety too, the kind that exercises and expands, that opens up new regions of knowing and being. We try to access this kind at Holy Cross by encouraging and even, though not enough, incentivizing students to explore and experiment. But the dominant forms coming the way of our students can be destructive and can undermine those other forms of anxiety that are oriented toward growth, expansion, *learning*. How to diminish the destructive forms and strengthen the good ones thus becomes an immense, and immensely important, challenge.

9 Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 25.

10 Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 209.

11 Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 293.

Whatever else the anxious, frightened, confused students who come to see us may need, they are surely in need of our care, our capacity to truly be for them and with them. For if they are truly encased in their anxious alienation, they will need something, outside the perimeter of the self, to "unself" them, as Iris Murdoch said,[12] to draw them out of themselves. We educators can be part of this process—not just through our empathy or compassion but through the kind of education we seek to provide.

The College of the Holy Cross Mission Statement

The Holy Cross mission statement is, we believe, a compelling document testifying to our deepest aspirations. It was composed more than three decades ago but seems tailored to the challenges that we just described. At the risk of plodding but with the aim of thoroughness, we will read through it carefully, offering commentary geared toward student anxiety and how a Holy Cross education might, in principle, direct it positively—or "hold" it.

In the first paragraph, we read the following:

> The College of the Holy Cross is, by tradition and choice, a Jesuit liberal arts college serving the Catholic community, American society, and the wider world. To participate in the life of Holy Cross is to accept an invitation to join in dialogue about basic human questions: What is the moral character of learning and teaching? How do we find meaning in life and history? What are our obligations to one another? What is our special responsibility to the world's poor and powerless?

The opening notes of participation, invitation, and dialogue establish Holy Cross as interested in freedom shared in common. Although it welcomes students who have succeeded in competition and who are hungry for more, it is a place for collaboration just as much as competition. Remembering this key point should allay some anxiety among students, faculty, and staff alike. A similar note of freedom is struck with the enumeration of "basic human questions." To ask such questions and to attempt answers to them affirms the human capacity for truth-seeking and for desiring goodness. Needless to say, other basic human questions may be asked, but we consider these a solid start—if, and only if, they are actually pursued in the classroom and in the wider college community.

The second paragraph moves more concretely into Holy Cross's shared work as a Jesuit and Catholic college:

> As a liberal arts college, Holy Cross pursues excellence in teaching, learning, and research. All who share its life are challenged to be open to new ideas,

12 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 1970).

> to be patient with ambiguity and uncertainty, to combine a passion for truth with respect for the views of others. Informed by the presence of diverse interpretations of the human experience, Holy Cross seeks to build a community marked by freedom, mutual respect, and civility. Because the search for meaning and value is at the heart of the intellectual life, critical examination of fundamental religious and philosophical questions is integral to liberal arts education. Dialogue about these questions among people from diverse academic disciplines and religious traditions requires everyone to acknowledge and respect differences. Dialogue also requires us to remain open to that sense of the whole which calls us to transcend ourselves and challenges us to seek that which might constitute our common humanity.

There is a great deal here. Indeed, what we have in this pithy paragraph is an unabashed proclamation of some of the central virtues that animate our work as educators. There are, of course, the usual ones—for example, the pursuit of excellence (Who could disagree?). But there are others that seem less usual, such as patience with ambiguity and uncertainty. We might have added openness to mystery too. Of course we want our students to "know." But we also want them to acknowledge and respect what they *don't* know and perhaps *can't* know. This is intellectual humility as a virtue.

Not, however, to the exclusion of a "passion for truth"—acknowledging the many whose equally fervent passion for truth may lead them to quite different, maybe even antithetical, perspectives and commitments. Passion for truth entails confidence that there's always more to learn, and that every effort at learning will be rewarded. It shouldn't be frustrating not to know everything already. It should be invigorating. And freeing. A community marked by freedom, mutual respect, and civility—this is an even more countercultural vision now than it was decades ago. Our students are coming up in a world marked by pronounced social media–fueled animosity. Respect and civility have hardly ever been more in need of recovery. We also must insist anew that the search for meaning and value is at the heart of intellectual life, and thus that critical examination of fundamental religious and philosophical questions is integral to a liberal arts education.

If truth be told, it is not entirely clear how acceptable these particular values and commitments are to some at Holy Cross. In addition to challenging the rage-saturated environment of politics, Holy Cross's commitment to engaged, dialogical investigation of open-ended questions cuts across the grain of the dispassionate, discipline-based inquiry that is the hallmark of the modern academy. Nevertheless, through such venues as Montserrat, the College's first-year seminar sequence,[13] students have the

13 Montserrat houses six "clusters"—Contemporary Challenges, Core Human Questions, Divine, Global Society, Natural World, and Self—each of which

opportunity to explore such questions in an intimate context explicitly geared toward turning them on to the richness of intellectual culture and its value for exploring the lives they lead and the worlds they inhabit.

As the mission statement goes on to emphasize,

> Dialogue about these questions among people from diverse academic disciplines and religious traditions requires everyone to acknowledge and respect differences. Dialogue also requires us to remain open to that sense of the whole which calls us to transcend ourselves and challenges us to seek that which might constitute our common humanity.

There is much in these two sentences as well. The first is fairly familiar territory and is likely articulated in some form or other at most liberal arts institutions.[14] The second sentence is more anomalous and would likely be considered by many to be either incomprehensible or problematically regressive. At issue is holism. What exactly is "that sense of the whole"? What does it mean for us to "transcend ourselves"? To what extent is it legitimate to posit a "common humanity" given the vast differences that exist across time and space? How exactly do we "seek" it? Holy Cross's aspiration toward holism may raise anxiety—isn't developing a sense of the whole a hopeless luxury when there are so many individual details of life that need to be mastered?

This is a small sampling of the questions some might pose in the face of such high-minded, quasi-religious language. But these questions are precisely what makes this sentence so countercultural. The *magis* comes to mind: the idea that there is more to our existence, and to the world, than meets the eye and that by living it we can acquire something of a bulwark against those forces, internal and external, that threaten and undermine the fabric of being and belonging.

We're back to the idea of mystery. It bears noting here that the Office of College Chaplains at Holy Cross is a much-valued site for students in psychological and/or spiritual distress as well as those, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, who may experience themselves as uncomfortably "other" in the eyes of peers. Also important are the many opportunities for spiritual and religious exploration and expansion sponsored by the office,

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brings together faculty from a range of disciplines and sponsors curricular and co-curricular events to support student learning and growth.

14 Familiar though the ideas embedded in this sentence may be, we acknowledge that some of its central terms—"dialogue," "diverse," "differences"—are currently under attack in some quarters for their putative "wokeness." This, of course, makes their inclusion in a college mission statement that much more necessary.

in the form of one-on-one counseling, retreats, service ventures, prayer, liturgy, and community-building.

It is a short step from these ideas to the next paragraph of the mission statement:

> The faculty and staff of Holy Cross, now primarily lay and religiously and culturally diverse, also affirm the mission of Holy Cross as a Jesuit college. As such, Holy Cross seeks to exemplify the longstanding dedication of the Society of Jesus to the intellectual life and its commitment to the service of faith and promotion of justice. The College is dedicated to forming a community which supports the intellectual growth of all its members while offering them opportunities for spiritual and moral development. In a special way, the College must enable all who choose to do so to encounter the intellectual heritage of Catholicism, to form an active worshipping community, and to become engaged in the life and work of the contemporary church.

Is there less anxiety at Jesuit colleges and universities than exists elsewhere? It is difficult to say. But there may be more resources available to students, in the classroom and beyond, to lessen anxiety's potentially destructive force. As for why this may be, we believe it has something to do with the numerous sources of "ex-centric"—in contradistinction to ego-centric—energies at our institutions. Yes, a premium is still placed on individual achievement, of the sort that garners high GPAs and highly sought honors. And, yes, we want students to become their best selves. But there is so much that goes on at Holy Cross and its sibling schools that works as a counterweight to the competitive, profit-oriented neoliberal ethos that continues to reign supreme, especially at elite colleges and universities. It is no doubt the case that some at these colleges and universities consider places like Holy Cross "quaint." They may even be taken aback that such places still exist. Hasn't all that sense-of-the-whole, transcendence-of-self religious stuff been superseded, replaced by more modern, secular, progressive ideas and practices? Well, *no*. And this, again, is what makes Jesuit colleges and universities as countercultural as they tend to be. It's also what makes them special, and vitally important, for taking on some of the anxious ills of our time simply by doing what they do. Holy Cross is not a simple safe haven. This is neither possible nor desirable. For alongside anxiety's destructive potential is its creative potential, its ability to serve as an engine for self-expansion and growth. To say that Holy Cross commits to the service of faith and the promotion of justice is to announce that it takes freedom seriously. The great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard teaches that anxiety is the feeling of freedom, and to be educated by anxiety is to be primed for free living. If Holy Cross students are anxious, we aim

to accompany them as they channel this anxiety toward lives of freedom, of abundant fullness.

The final paragraph:

> Since 1843, Holy Cross has sought to educate students who, as leaders in business, professional, and civic life, would live by the highest intellectual and ethical standards. In service of this ideal, Holy Cross endeavors to create an environment in which integrated learning is a shared responsibility, pursued in classroom and laboratory, studio and theater, residence and chapel. Shared responsibility for the life and governance of the College should lead all its members to make the best of their own talents, to work together, to be sensitive to one another, to serve others, and to seek justice within and beyond the Holy Cross community.

This too is fairly standard fare—although the goal of living "by the highest intellectual and ethical standards" appears to be in woefully short supply. We offer it here mainly to complete the portrait we have been painting. This is what is meant by freedom: anxiety taken in a positive direction.

Anxious Education and the Love That Holds

We are suggesting that anxiety has creative potential. In some ways, it can plausibly be said that Jesuit education, if it truly abides by the principles outlined in our mission statement, is *anxious* education. It insists on helping students move into new, uncharted territory through the questions it poses, the practices it supports, and the deep values, ideals, and beliefs it seeks to promote. This territory cannot help but lead to ambiguity and uncertainty, perhaps even more ambiguity and uncertainty than might be found elsewhere. Anxiety is inevitable, and, as the mission statement suggests, it is integral to our students' intellectual, personal, and spiritual growth. But such growth is only made possible in a culture of care, in a community in which people like us are truly available to them, able to be there for them amid their growing pains. This isn't just a matter of resources, programs, and counseling centers—important though they are. It's a matter of responsiveness and responsibility across the board, among all faculty and staff and the students themselves as they interact with one another. Philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas sets forth some prime coordinates for the culture of care that we have in mind: "Responsibility here is not a cold juridical agency. It is all the gravity of the love of the neighbor."[15] Is it not such love that in the end provides not only a community of learners but

15 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 163.

a *home*, one that seeks to hold our students with care as they venture forth into the unknown?

We should concretize what we envision when we talk about a Holy Cross education as a culture of care and, in being such, as challenging students to direct their anxiety positively. Each of us has taught a course that we judge to be a good example of such education. Here are our respective descriptions.

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Mark: Of all the courses I taught or co-taught at Holy Cross across some 38 years, CreateLab looms large as perhaps the best example of what we are calling anxious education. In the most recent version of the course, in Spring 2022, I taught alongside faculty from Spanish, theatre and dance, and visual arts. We met with some forty students in a theater space (which was no doubt anxiety-provoking in itself). In keeping with previous versions of the course, we refrained from crafting a fixed syllabus and instead shared what we called a "near-syllabus," which provided a rough sketch of the topics to be pursued, the activities that had been planned in conjunction with visiting artists, and so on. Here is the introductory paragraph outlining the general nature of the course:

> CreateLab is an experimental course that invites you, through lectures, performances, and collaborative projects, to explore your own creativity and imagination in the context of examining the theme of "Looking Backward, Moving Forward." The course goals are lofty. We encourage you to: think creatively and deeply, take risks, articulate and tackle your fears, build and stand by your arguments, embrace ambiguity and vulnerability, sustain long-range project development, collaborate and commit to teamwork, honor process as well as product, and engage in *doing* even as you draw upon research and theory. We expect you to develop skill sets that will transfer to other classes and to your life beyond Holy Cross. The faculty are here to facilitate, instigate, provoke, and support you along the way.

Regarding the theme, we added the following:

> In view of the pandemic and its painful consequences, lives senselessly lost to racial and ethnic violence, the troubled state of political life, and much more, this is an opportune time for taking stock of the past, orienting ourselves in the present, and moving forward, creatively, into the future. How shall we do so? What role can the arts play in the process, and how might we, members of the Holy Cross and Worcester community, be a part of it? By exploring these questions in the arts and beyond, this year's offering of CreateLab seeks to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the creative process, the ways

> in which the arts can speak to the wider world, and the larger political, ethical, and spiritual concerns that inform creative work.

In our exploration of these questions and concerns, we had students read selections from an edited volume, *Alone Together: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19*,[16] as well as Questlove's newly published book *The Creative Quest*.[17] In addition, we decided to take a deep dive into dementia via my own recently finished book on my mother, *Do I Look at You with Love? Reimagining the Story of Dementia*[18]; a lovely book of poems, *Honeycomb*, written by the Spanish professor's mother about his father's dementia[19]; and a photographic journey into the institutional dimension of dementia created by an artist at nearby Clark University whose father had also succumbed to dementia. Throughout the semester, we hosted an incredible array of visiting artists who were with us not only to share their work but to work closely with our students and help them develop their own imagination and creative process. As we said at the end of the near-syllabus,

> There is much more to say about the course, about what's in this document, and about how the semester will actually evolve. Some of it we know now. And some of it we don't—which means that where, and how, the course goes will be a function of you, us, the visiting artists, goings-on in the campus community and wider world, and more. We look forward to the ride, and hope you do too!

Was the course unequivocally wonderful? Well, no; it wasn't that semester and it wasn't in the other versions in which I had participated either. How could it be? It was a roller coaster, with high highs, low lows, and everything in between. For some students, it was probably too much; they had heard it was a "cool" course, decided to give it a try, and were no doubt nauseated at times by the whole thing. How were they supposed to collaborate on works of art without a background in art? How were they supposed to work intensively alongside students and faculty they didn't know? How was everything going to be evaluated and graded? Anxiety was inevitable. But when the course worked, it *really* worked and it allowed students to grow in ways they could scarcely have imagined. For this to happen, they had to

16 Jennifer Haupt, ed., *Alone Together: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19* (Central Avenue Poetry, 2020).

17 Questlove, *The Creative Quest* (Ecco, 2019).

18 Mark Freeman, *Do I Look at You with Love? Reimagining the Story of Dementia* (Brill | Sense, 2021).

19 Carol Frost, *Honeycomb* (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2010).

be *held* and, on some level, *loved*. This didn't mean "coddled" or "soothed"; it meant *being there*, for them and with them, human to human, vulnerable and real. It also meant seeing in their anxiety a possible opening into new, uncharted regions of their own being. I can recall one student who had to leave in the middle of a session because it was too much; she couldn't contain it, and neither could we at that particular time. She knew what was at stake in a way that surely surpassed most of the others in the class, who had sturdier defenses. In the end, she did some amazing things and extended the process of her own formation in an extraordinarily powerful way.

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Peter: In Fall 2023, I co-taught a course in the Department of Visual Arts with my studio art colleague, Professor Rachelle Beaudoin (I am a theologian with a bachelor's degree in fine arts studio). The course was called "Play+Work: God/Art/Corita." The name "Corita" refers to Corita Kent (1918–1986), an artist, educator, and sometime vowed religious sister who, we wagered, had a pedagogical practice that could be fruitfully implemented by others to form students in attention and free creativity. Corita was famous for unconventional assignments, such as sending her art students to grocery stores and car washes to observe what was going on through viewfinders (empty slide cases), or to plan and stage parades. Her pedagogical methods, in ways similar to CreateLab, allowed a great deal of improvisation and serendipity in her courses, and in ours. Students were assigned some standard academic exercises: series of drawings, sketchbooks, theological and historical readings, essays. But in addition, and increasingly as the semester progressed, we gave students open-ended assignments. They were required to plan and execute a collaborative artwork that would address an urgent social issue on campus and should involve, in some active way, audience participation. They had to prepare and enact a celebration (all students worked together to throw a birthday party for one student's dogs). As assignments became more amorphous, students grew more nervous and resistant—even frustrated with Rachelle and me. Their anxiety arose, we knew, from their habit of needing to produce something specific based on being told exactly what to do. To have freedom to create, with minimal constraints, was dizzying. And this wasn't just true for the students. Rachelle and I ended the course mostly discouraged. A few students loved it—fine. But a handful panned it in the course evaluations. One student almost didn't finish, getting in her final batch of work only at our strenuous prompting. I tried to look on the bright side, telling my colleague that the effects of this course might not be immediate, but its success would manifest itself eventually.

In the two years since, the effects have gradually come to light. Two of the studio students recently staged their senior shows. The influence of our course was obvious: daring use of unconventional materials, free thinking, deep conceptual engagement with subject matter, and, most basic but also most important, penetrating attentiveness. Another student was recently named a Fenwick Scholar—Holy Cross's top academic honor—on the merit of a proposed interdisciplinary project with a participatory dimension clearly modeled on Corita's pedagogy. Rachelle sent me an email a few months ago that read in part: "You were right to say that we were planting seeds and that the students would come back to the material and come to realize its significance as they had time and space from it."[20] Our students' flourishing became our relief. We were all educated by anxiety.

The key, so far as we were concerned, was the spirit of Corita that we felt emboldened to channel in the course because of Holy Cross's Jesuit educational ethos: we could dare students to be creative and to defy convention because (1) *they* were doing all this together, in the interest of collaboration rather than competition; and (2) *we* instructors were accompanying them in the adventure—offering support, feedback, encouragement, and even, when necessary, admonition—but also challenging ourselves to do something without anticipatable results. Students and instructors alike had an environment in which to grow.

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Frances: In April 2025, my Montserrat students and I painted a mural in collaboration with the Worcester artist Jennessa Burks, funded by the Marshal Memorial Grant. Burks held listening sessions with the students and collected their ideas into a striking image of shattered glass—fragments, like the fragments on a stained-glass window—through which figures from the Worcester community can be seen, figures with whom my students had been working weekly in various service capacities for the community-based learning (CBL) component of our seminar. From a top corner, the image of an ear inscribed with a question mark sets off the first colored shards, which combine to cover two full walls (the mural is in the facility called the Worcester House, which offers meeting space, furnished with tech equipment but also a tea kettle for Holy Cross campus constituents and broader community). Across the room from the ear, as if in front of the colored-glass ground, an encounter between two people, or perhaps two communities, is offered in the image of hands shaking a greeting. The symbol of Holy Cross closes the mural on the far wall. Through some

20 Professor Rachelle Beaudoin, personal communication via email, May 19, 2025.

of the shards of color one can make out a river flowing—the Blackstone River perhaps, which flows at the foot of the hill that Holy Cross stands on, cutting it off from Worcester like a natural moat, flowing alongside the near-impassable highway. Between the sign of Holy Cross and the river, inspired by the students' descriptions, Burks painted a bridge.

That bridge is, of course, a bridge to bridge divides. It recognizes the difference between the privileges of the liberal arts school and the difficulties endured by those to whom we are obligated. In the words of the Holy Cross mission statement, which Mark and Peter have quoted above: "the poor and powerless" who live and work amongst other places, on the other side of the river.[21] But the bridge is not only or even primarily about Holy Cross students crossing over to the Worcester "powerless," where they helped tutor high-school students new to the country and the language, helped run a thrift store for a shelter for battered women, helped stock a food pantry for those without food, and so on. It is also about the way the connection to Worcester brought help to the Holy Cross students—perhaps most obviously in the painting of the mural itself, whose success is owed to Burks' eye as well as to the ear with which she listened to them.

The "bridge" first became a motif in our seminar when we read E. M. Forster's novel *Howard's End*. There, Forster points out, in the voice of his heroine Meg Schlegel, that being human means contending with an internal scission: between "the angel" in us and "the beast." In Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*, this is the very split that makes us anxious. I have to encounter myself, cross a bridge between myself and me, teach myself who I want to be, and this despite the fact that I have all on my own no power to create myself afresh, and that I find myself in this particular historical political context. I didn't make this suffering, and now I find myself answerable to those who suffer: I didn't choose to have a heart as well as hands, and now I have to work out what to do with them! This rift between the reflective and the immediate in each person is repeated when one tries to communicate: there is an almost untraversable ravine between images and ideas (try making a mural out of a philosophy class!). And then, again, another nearly impassable torrent between text and experience, when it

21 The intertext for this reference in the Holy Cross mission statement is clearly Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, which includes the passage on the lily and the bird, as well as Jesus' admonition not to worry or be anxious. To care (*cura*, *curare*) for the poor and powerless is to become less anxious about one's own worries (*cura*, *curae*). For a fuller development, see Frances Maughan-Brown, *The Lily's Tongue* (SUNY, 2019); and Frances Maughan-Brown and Rick Anthony Furtak, *Kierkegaard and the Poetry of the Gospel: Essays on the Lily Discourses* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

comes to learning. What bridges can a teacher build in a first-year seminar to help her students learn from philosophical texts?

Bridges that are never guaranteed, that may always fail, and that even when most successful, mark the gap they try to cross. Each time we try to cross, we leap, we take a risk. If a student is going to be allowed (encouraged?) to become aware of the "internal" division or task that is human, allowed (encouraged?) to become anxious in any actual way, it is possible that their anxiety might turn into what has been referred to above as "pathological." As teachers, we cannot afford to take that danger lightly. If we send students into Worcester to "learn," we cannot avoid the risk of using people in the community as tools for education. And yet community-based learning does not hope simply to bring "service" to Worcester; on the contrary it works to facilitate an encounter from which Holy Cross students might learn.

This is partly what the Montserrat Program aims to do: How do we bring ideas to life for students in a way that goes beyond the classroom? Which is to ask both: How might we bring in experiential learning as a pedagogical practice? And how do we deliver (always only as midwives) learning that can be lived? It requires a sensitivity that might exceed institutional encoding. (It *should* make us anxious.)

In order to prepare for the community-based learning component of our class, we read a little tale about a river: this time the question is not whether or how one should *cross* the river but whether to *go up* the river. If something horrible is continuously floating down a river (systematic oppression, racism, sexism, poverty, for instance), should we remain in a place that allows us to fish it out and deal with it piecemeal, or should we go up the river to ask why it keeps coming toward us? This is the river that the students told Burks about, and so painted into our mural is the question which might be put as: what is required now, philosophical questioning or action? Except that philosophical questioning might sometimes happen best in the form of action. What does it take to inquire, to learn? In other words, the questions raised by Holy Cross's mission statement turn out to be inextricable from each other: "What are our obligations to one another?" and "What is our special responsibility to the world's poor and powerless?" will not be separated from "What is the moral character of learning and teaching?" and "How do we find meaning in life and history?" To ask what learning is or how to approach meaning is to ask about our responsibilities.

The mural project was an experiment. The idea was to do something out of the ordinary in order to trace those elements in the CBL experience that might have been surprising, unsettling, disruptive—human. Those elements for which one might take responsibility. The thing about bridges,

when they really get going, like the very highways or rivers they mean to cross, is that they don't work only when they're doing what is beneficial or enlightening. "Anxiety" might name a way of registering that one has to weigh or judge the bridge always *again*. In this sense, it is a burden we can't afford to give up.

Our class was called "Machine and Revolt," and we studied Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*. What happens, Heidegger asks, when we live in a world that is highly mechanized, instrumentalized, in which everything around us is a piece of "technology" or a kind of machine? If we approach the world as a matter of so many resources available for our use, if we talk of everything—including ourselves—in terms of "tools" (what do you have in your "toolbox" when you're feeling anxious?), what happens if we start using one another mechanically? Arendt gives testimony of what happens. When Kierkegaard says in *The Concept of Anxiety* that possibility is heavier than actuality,[22] he cries out for us to respond: You, Kierkegaard, died before the Holocaust. No thought could fathom something worse. Actuality is the heaviest. Only there is the possibility that the worst kinds of actuality might somehow be repeated. Why does it make no sense to talk about "anxiety" here? Because we must talk more seriously. We have a duty to make sure such things never happen again.

Our duty to resist genocide with all our human capacity is not a matter of a clear set of pedagogical instructions: "Paper topics must include a moral agenda" or worse, "the nation-state of Israel must not be criticized." But what is our duty then? If learning has to do with our obligations to one another, and if our obligations include those whom it would be most convenient to forget, the poor, the powerless, and if, finally, the question of meaning in life is at stake here, what kind of teaching is asked for?

I don't think my students really felt anxious about painting the mural; one or two worried that they wouldn't be good enough until I explained that it would be a paint-by-numbers project. Then they just got ready to enjoy it, to mess around with colors and be together with one another in a different way. We *did* do something that was not merely mechanical—that celebrated the human and our fragmentation; our ability to look through glass that is always colored in one way or another but which lets light in nevertheless; and our attempts at listening.

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22 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. with an introduction and notes by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton University Press, 1980), 156.

Each of these courses, in quite different ways, sought to provide a holding environment for our students. This meant providing an environment that both aimed toward their authentic growth—anxiety-provoking though it had to be—and supported them, lovingly, along the way. One might say that our students' anxiety had to be carefully and caringly *cultivated*, allowing them the opportunity to expand their sense of freedom and creative possibility. Because this was risky territory, we needed to truly accompany them through their inevitable growing pains. Suffice it to say that the results were well worth the risks involved.

Coda: Anxieties and Psychologies, Formative and Deformative

It should be clear from all that has been said here that there is no singular "anxiety." Rather, there are multiple anxieties: ones that frighten and enclose and ones that exhilarate and open. Many of the former are about encountering the sheer weight of the world. Many of the latter are about freeing oneself from this very weight and thereby opening up new horizons of knowing, feeling, and being. We do not pretend that Jesuit education is all about "replacing" the former with the latter through some sort of magical, quasi-alchemical transformation. The weighted world is too much with us; it cannot be escaped. It is important, we believe, to let students know that we are aware of this. That can help them feel recognized, seen. And it can allow them to feel held as they embark on their respective paths of formation.

It may seem curious that the anxiety that debilitates and deforms is cut from the same fundamental cloth as the anxiety that creatively forms. How can it be that adjacent to DSM-style "pathology" are the very wellsprings of formative self-realization? The challenge, as Kierkegaard says, is to be anxious in the right way, for "whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate."[23] It's not clear that there is a "right way" to be anxious. But there are certainly better and worse ways, and one of our tasks as educators at Jesuit colleges and universities is to serve as the shepherds of these better ways. For severely debilitating forms of anxiety, psychological intervention may be warranted and all the tools of psychological science and scientifically grounded psychotherapy should be brought to the task. But for those forms that are part and parcel of being human and living in an anxious world like our own, fashioning a holding environment grounded in Ignatian ideas and ideals may be the appropriate path. This is so because these ideas and ideals place care for the whole person, *cura personalis*, at the very center of education, and this care entails a different

23 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 155.

kind of intervention and a different kind of psychology entirely—one that is more broadly humanistic in its concerns. *Cura personalis* calls for *cura psychologia*, manifested in the present context as *cura anxietatis*. The task is large and ambiguous, uncertain and unwieldy. And it is a great gift to have the opportunity to be a part of it.

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