

JEFFREY CARLSON

# Against Being Inclusive

THE TERM “inclusive excellence,” made popular by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and adopted by many schools across the country, including my own, is in some ways unfortunate, in that the concept of “including,” arguably, assumes the priority and ongoing dominance of a given reality into which one may (or may not) be granted admission. Our work in the university should be not merely inclusive, but more radically pluralistic and truly dialogical. Inclusion would seem

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initially to constitute an improvement over exclusion; however, it masks dominance—the power to grant or deny inclusion—and so is, in some ways, less honest than outright exclusion. It invites others to take a seat at

the table, to be included there, but does not necessarily anticipate, much less attempt to facilitate, conditions for the possibility of truly novel developments—a radical rearrangement or even replacement of the furniture itself, as it were. “Excellence” cannot be merely inclusive, since excellence ought to intend an ongoing transcendence of the given, and so we ought to imagine, instead of mere inclusion into that given, a scenario wherein dialogue is a first principle, an always-already condition for the very possibility of imagining and reimagining our educational missions.

Dominican University’s mission calls for pursuit of truth, which I would argue requires deep and serious engagement with diverse others and multiple perspectives. Thus, in our learning, no idea stands in isolation. Every

concept, every student, and every teacher is potentially a conversation partner. We must, therefore, advance our journey from episodic moments of diversity within the curriculum and cocurriculum to an epistemology of diversity—a way of thinking and basic posture—across the curriculum and cocurriculum. The critical and integrative thinker is one who learns enough to be able to consider multiple views, multiple approaches to a problem, multiple applications of a theory or concept; who adjudicates between them in a deliberate and reflective manner; and who develops a coherent, informed, and ethically responsible vision. This habit of heart and mind—engaged, critical and integrative, dynamic, rigorous, and questioning—is vital to the lifelong learner and ought to be the hallmark of an educated person in our institutions of higher learning. Inclusion into the given is not enough. Our journey away from exclusion must move beyond inclusion and enact a more intrinsically pluralistic first principle for construing higher education itself—an epistemology of diversity that envelops and informs all we say and do, in an educational trajectory that has a radically open future.

A story. It’s an early evening in December in the mid-1970s. I’m starting my shift at the Morton Grove, Illinois, unit of the now-defunct Jojo’s restaurant chain. I am a table server. One of my friends, also a server, arrives and says with a sigh, “What a drag. It’s Chanukah and I have to work tonight.” Within earshot is the manager of this restaurant. She comes over and says, “Chanukah. Oh yes, that’s your Christmas.” I knew that something was wrong with this picture. I didn’t have all my facts straight, but something was definitely wrong.

That’s all I remember of the exchange. But it serves now to illustrate an important point. The manager didn’t dismiss my friend. Instead, the manager sought to demonstrate understanding, to show that she knew and cared about

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Chanukah and about her employee. But what does Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, the eight-day celebration of the Jews' successful refusal to desecrate their temple at the command of Syrian Greeks in 165 BCE and to give up their beliefs and practices, have to do with the celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth? Isn't it the case that the act of making Chanukah the Jewish functional equivalent of the Christian celebration of Christmas, in fact, subsumes Chanukah under alien categories, seeing Jewish reality through Christian lenses, thereby distorting the Jewish reality and not really understanding it at all? Isn't it particularly ironic that Chanukah actually celebrates the successful refusal of Jews to be assimilated? Wouldn't it have been better if the manager had asked my friend what Chanukah was? Wouldn't it have been nice if the manager knew that she needed to ask that question, if she knew how much she didn't know?

How much of our so-called knowledge and understanding is like this? How often and how extensively do we spread our assumptions over the world like a template, forcing whatever we find to fit? Is this what we mean when we interview job candidates, or meet with prospective students, and note the extent to which they are or are not a good "fit" for our universities? Or what we mean when we review faculty and staff we've already hired, or when we advise or mentor students, and even in some cases when we grade our students' work? Do the assumptions of some set the agenda for all—forcing others to fit preconceived notions, and accepting them only when and if we can, somehow, transform them into us?

### **Authentic conversation**

Robert Schreier has identified five dynamics, five ways we fail to understand the other well: the other is homogenized (seen as not really different), colonized (the other is inferior and needs to be elevated to our level, whereupon difference will disappear), demonized (seen as a threat to be expunged), romanticized (held to be superior in its otherness, but so exotic that it doesn't threaten our way of seeing or acting), or pluralized (a debilitating, indifferent relativism in which there is thought to be no possibility of knowing the other in any authentic way).<sup>1</sup>

In authentic conversation, we need to avoid these dynamics and instead allow people to name themselves. That goes for the erroneous

includers as well as for those erroneously included. When people name themselves, some interesting, edifying, liberating things happen.

Have you ever had a real conversation? I don't mean the kind where you do all the talking, or where you can't get a word in edgewise. I don't mean the kind where you're being sold something, or trying to sell. I mean the kind where you really "get lost" in the dialogue itself, in the exchange of ideas, the exploring of possibilities only to then "find yourself" seeing things differently. You've grown. What would happen if we tried to think of our classes in the university, our exchanges at work, our assessment of events in the world, in our communities, in our families, and with our friends as opportunities for conversation? In these situations, various persons, places, texts, objects, and events are "speaking" to us. They are asking questions, making claims, making connections, suggesting a way of being in the world. Comprehending what they say is, of course, crucial. But that isn't enough. In any other real conversation, didn't you do more than just listen passively and understand? Didn't you respond in some way? Didn't you ask questions, raise objections, push ideas in different directions, or relate your conversation partner's viewpoint to what you already knew or had experienced?

In any authentic conversation, a free, thinking person puts her or his assumptions at risk by considering seriously the conversation partner, in the hope of realizing a transformation of perspective and establishing the conditions for the possibility of a less violent, more interdependent community.

We come to any moment of interpretation, of interaction, of perception and experience, shaped and prepared by a host of influencing factors, in what Paul Tillich and then Rollo May called a mix of freedom and destiny. Types of destiny include cosmic, like the very facts of birth and death; genetic, such as physical characteristics like skin color and gender; and also the array of cultural influences and contexts of personal experiences, celebrated and endured.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a conversation. You introduce yourself. "I am \_\_\_\_." The "I" of that introduction is always the product of a process, the present amalgam of impermanently related bits and pieces borne of the mix of freedom and destiny that each of us manifests in any given moment. I am the present culmination and compilation of all that. This is what I bring to the conversation. This is what I assume, what assumes me.



Dominican University

So as a teacher, I'm not just teaching "the material." I'm teaching "the students," which means that I'm inviting them, each of them, with their particular present blends of connectedness to past realities, to interact with the "stuff" of our course and with each other. Alongside of or, better, enveloping the acquisition of skills and knowledge taught to them in the university, students need opportunities to be about the task of detecting and clarifying their own presuppositions, including their implicit and explicit core convictions. Students should be invited to put their assumptions at risk in a disciplined, critical, respectful consideration of compelling possibilities—possibilities they encounter, through conversation, in the materials of their studies, in their cocurricular engagement, and in their fellow learners.

In conversation, we hope for understanding of the other. If something is absolutely unique, then I have no way to relate it to what I already consider to be true. I have no way to allow it to transform my present assumptions. I cannot learn from it, or even understand it. And so bridges must be built, and tentative, fragile similarities must be sought and risked. Not blithe inclusion, but hopeful and careful conversation. Not "homogenization" or "colonization," not a "pluralization" that renders the other completely unknowable. But instead a hopeful, even faithful practice of what David Tracy calls "the analogical imagination"—wherein the other may be, at least to some degree, understood in her or his own terms, and also may be related, compared, contrasted with the self I bring to the conversation.<sup>3</sup>

### Serious consideration

Again, in any authentic conversation, a free, thinking person puts her or his assumptions at risk by considering seriously the conversation partner, in the hope of realizing a transformation

of perspective and establishing the conditions for the possibility of a less violent, more interdependent community. What is entailed in this second component—considering seriously? Simply put, it involves a disciplined and respectful listening to the conversation partner, without either dismissing him or her from the start, or foisting my own assumptions upon my partner.

In a memorable scene from the film *The Blues Brothers*, Jake and Ellwood stroll into a bar and ask the proprietor what kind of music is preferred there. "We like *both* kinds," is the response, "Country *and* Western." When our assumptions are so rigid that they allow us to see and hear only that which conforms to our expectations, then no matter how different our conversation partner may be, we will find only more of the same. Taking stock of assumptions entails challenging ourselves, as well as other individuals and communities, to inventory honestly and assess critically the multiple elements comprising their identities, including those biases that operate when not acknowledged.

Another story: A father and son were in a car crash, and the father was killed instantly. The son required emergency surgery. The son was brought into the operating room and the surgeon rushed in, looked at the patient, and exclaimed, "My God, I can't operate on him—he's my son!"

Were you puzzled by this story? If before reading this essay you had been surveyed on whether or not women could be surgeons, most likely you'd have said yes. But if you were puzzled by this story, why is that? Why not assume that the surgeon was his Mother? Or that the son was part of a same-sex marriage family? Or another scenario? What we say we believe may not always be the truth we perform in practice, as other assumptions may instead be operative.

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Unmasking assumptions and biases, sometimes something only another can do for us, is a crucial component of education, a key moment in creating the conditions for the possibility of authentic conversation and deep learning. If I clarify my own assumptions, and if I listen seriously to my conversation partner, then I must allow my assumptions to be challenged or affirmed. Every conversation is a risk and a hope. The risk is that I might be changed; and that is also the hope. The serious consideration both of one's own commitments and those of others, which may be very different, could enrich and perhaps challenge one's particular views of reality, leading to self-discovery and even mutual transformation.

Educators should orchestrate conditions for the possibility of rigorous, always careful, and often passionate pursuit of live options, wherever they lead. I tell students that participation in authentic and informed conversation is nothing less than an act of hope—hope in the possibility of intellectual and personal transformation, our best first step together toward emancipation from ignorance, toward overcoming violence and bias, toward discovering who we truly are or ought to be.

bell hooks writes that the heartbeat of critical thinking is a longing to know and that children are naturally curious, yet too quickly they are educated for conformity and obedience and told that thinking is dangerous. By

the time they get to college, she writes, students dread thinking. They believe they're just supposed to consume information and regurgitate it at appropriate moments.<sup>4</sup> She calls us to an engaged pedagogy that aims to restore students' will to think, to see multiple sides of an issue, to be open to new evidence, to discover facts and then ask what matters most about them,

to think beneath the surface and seek the core, underlying truths, not just what's obvious. It is, she says, an interactive process. It is conversation. And the conversation is hampered not only by the diminishment of thinking, but more pointedly by worldviews that are racist, patriarchal, and in so many other ways biased, worldviews that teach students to support the status quo, crushing the self-esteem of some students as they internalize self-hatred and diminishing all in the process.

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Indeed, conversation must today be enacted in a context of both violence and inauthenticity—violence ranging from genocide to racism and sexism and microaggressions, along with a superficiality so characteristic of our American culture. Persons seldom are encouraged to appropriate critically their own authentic identities or to discern their own personal and professional vocations, mimicking instead the desires, goals, and insatiable lust for more material things that they see others pursuing so relentlessly. When desire is mimetic or imitative, we become what Kierkegaard called “the crowd,” “the herd.”

### **The syncretic self**

Where else does conversation's transformation take us? I propose, in conclusion, that it leads us to recognition of the “syncretic self.” Usually people think, disparagingly, of “syncretism” as the mixture of elements from two or more different systems in order to produce something artificial. But I would argue that to have an identity is, inevitably, to be a “syncretic self,” the product of a process of selective appropriation, internalizing elements drawn from vastly varied pools of possibility. We are this amalgam, this ever-changing assemblage of diverse elements, brought together out of freedom and amid a certain destiny, an array of cosmic, genetic, cultural, and experiential influences we cannot control completely.

This recognition has significant implications, both for personal and communal authenticity and for global ethics in an age of violence. As noted already, conversation challenges individuals and communities to inventory honestly and assess critically the multiple elements comprising their identities, including those biases that operate even, and especially, when not acknowledged. It also challenges us to rethink our very notions of “insider” versus “outsider,” in terms of the many group affiliations to which we pledge allegiance. I am suggesting, in fact, that each of our “inventories” shows the influence of many places and times. We are all, and each, intrinsically plural. Together, we share that formal complexity, that syncretic, mixed, hybrid identity.

As we position ourselves globally, and as we understand our very identities to be themselves intrinsically relational, we may come to acknowledge that, if the violence of our age involves the so-called “other,” a hatred of “them,” then

perhaps we can come to a newer vision, in which the self is itself already plural, mixed, hybrid, and so already in fact constituted, at least in part, by what we previously had labeled “other.” Then, perhaps we can experience the realization that the self is thereby united with every person by virtue of the syncretic nature of each of our identities. Perhaps this kind of realization will provide a way to hope and a way to move toward a future that is creative and liberating.

People say, and it is said about them: I am white. I am black. I am Buddhist. I am Christian. I am American. I am Tibetan. I am Chinese. I am male. I am female. I am human. I am animal. Identity depends upon such labels and badges and boundaries. There are times when persons need to name themselves. There are times, especially times of oppression and conflict, when persons must stand together under a common ethnic, national, or religious designation. They must stand together with a certainty and solidarity that proceeds as if these labels denote a pure, homogeneous, stable, and independent identity. So often it is necessary to stand there, and to assert this unity, precisely because there are times, so many times and for as long as we can remember, when precisely these labels are themselves appealed to as the bases of violence and hatred, discrimination and even genocide—as the reason to hate “those people.”

Yet, if the truth is told, isn’t all identity syncretic, mixed, hybrid, and fluid? Hasn’t our “center” been infiltrated by elements supposedly belonging beyond the boundary we would draw? Indeed, if we do not, ultimately, recognize the actual status, that is the constructed and impermanent status of these boundaries and these designations, we may be doomed to perpetuate the violence that made them necessary. And so, given the “mixedness” of us all, can we devise skillful means to begin again, to undo the wretched and rampant tribalisms that proceed from reified identities, which have been used to justify and perpetrate violence, a violence so pervasive that Edith Wyschogrod has called this a time of “man-made mass-death?”<sup>5</sup>

As we inspire students to think for themselves, we can instill in them, as Wendy Doniger has said, not only a hermeneutic of suspicion, critically pointing out weaknesses and flaws, but also one of retrieval and reconciliation, identifying and naming those who call us to a higher

and better way of being human, to moments of what she calls “transcendent unsettling.”<sup>6</sup> We can seek and cite those brilliant conversation partners, past and present, who lure us into a dialogue that really does advance truth and justice. We can inspire students to lead, as Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen have written, not only authentic lives, but also summoned lives and well-planned lives—lives that combine planning and perseverance, passion and authenticity, with being attuned to the needs of others.<sup>7</sup> And we can help students find, as Thich Nhat Hanh has said, their own door among the “84,000 dharma doors,” the 84,000 doors to the truth and to a truly right livelihood.<sup>8</sup> We can help them explore the relationship between making a living and making a life.

Our journey away from exclusion must move beyond mere inclusion and enact a more intrinsically pluralistic first principle for construing education itself—an epistemology of diversity that informs all we say and do, in an educational trajectory that engages in authentic dialogue, lured by a radically open future. *This is the how of our educational mission*—how we will prepare students, along with ourselves, to pursue truth, to give compassionate service, and to participate in the creation of a more just and humane world. □

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#### NOTES

1. Robert Schreier, “Teaching Theology From an Intercultural Perspective,” *Theological Education* 26, no. 1 (1989): 19.
2. Rollo May, *Freedom and Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 90–91.
3. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 362–4.
4. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 7–8.
5. Edith Wyschogrod, “Man-Made Mass Death: Shifting Concepts of Community,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, no. 2 (1990): 165–76.
6. See Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131.
7. *Ibid.*, 151.
8. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 39.

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