

Fresno Pacific and Community

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Had it not been for that glossy color brochure with the picture of a fountain softly back-lit through a fan of palm branches, I might not have applied to transfer to Fresno Pacific College in 1975. I had already successfully completed my first year of college at another Mennonite institution. Somehow, I knew, though, that a four-year education at one Mennonite school in a relatively small city in an eastern rural area was not going to satisfy me. I scoured that brochure, reading the lines, and between the lines, convincing myself that I would be able to minor in geography and continue my varsity volleyball life by starting a volleyball club. Surely, if there was a men's basketball team, there must be a gymnasium. Much to my immediate disappointment, after traveling thousands of miles, mostly alone by bus, and ending in the brownest landscape I had ever encountered, in a valley whose name I could not pronounce, there was no gymnasium and only an occasional geography course.

Fortunately, these disappointments were soon displaced by a period of intellectual and spiritual growth unlike anything earlier and which has informed my values, beliefs, and choices since. Just prior to beginning that trek across the continent to Fresno, I had experienced a transformative moment of spiritual clarity about the aspirational rather than accomplished nature of following Jesus. It is likely that my immanent major transition opened a space for insight and growth, but it was the curricular and co-curricular practices infused with the FP Idea that turned that insight into a lifelong commitment to seeking out the Jesus way.

Of critical importance was my immediate required membership in a mentoring group for new transfer students, led by Gary Nachtigall. I found my first close friends in this group, and disarmed by Gary's *joie de vivre*, humanity, and gentle prodding, I was also given opportunity to voice my emerging understanding of faith in life. Within the first semester at FPC, I was part of a self-organized small group of students, which gathered weekly to discuss how to enact radical discipleship in Fresno, the US, and the world. Admittedly, there was more talk than action while we were all studying, but for many in the group, what followed were lives of intentional peacemaking and community-building, of voluntary service around the world, and of commitment to seeking

the Jesus way within communities of faith. The immediate result of this dynamic first semester was my decision to be baptized and join a local Mennonite congregation early in the next semester.

My professors were either the original architects of the FP Idea or those who had been invited subsequently to further this educational experiment. Through divergent disciplinary lenses and personal experiences, they provided me with opportunities to build the content knowledge needed to think carefully and critically. Through, beside or despite that content, they cumulatively articulated a vision which called for resisting evil non-violently, standing with the marginalized, breaking down walls of privilege and power in order to build a “Sermon on the Mount”-like community. Foundational to this was a solid liberal arts education. Once in graduate studies, I recognized some weaknesses in breadth and depth in what a small denominational college could offer; nonetheless, I do not regret my decision to complete my undergraduate degree in such a context. What was developing as my moral compass has undergirded subsequent decision-making. Over time, I have been able to fill in the gaps in ways that have been more relevant to the needs at hand than they could have been if chosen as an undergraduate.

The intentional design of College Hour at that time also gave us access to a range of perspectives on enacting this vision. Phrases from some of the many guest speakers continue to challenge my complacency. For example, when I take for granted my own privilege and become complacent, I hear Peter Ediger challenging me to “live by the light that you see,” or when creating an “upside-down kingdom” community seems futile, I am encouraged by Tony Campolo reminding me that “it’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming.” Faculty-profiles, presented at least once each semester in College Hour, also demonstrated the diverse and circuitous journeys that had brought our professors to commit to the vision of the FPU idea. Because of courses I took, I discovered that a good number of them were participating in the same community of faith, which I joined before graduating and of which I remained a member for almost thirty years. The intersection of the disciplinary expert with the lay co-parishioner grounded the core values of the FP Idea in a living, not academically idealized, community of faith where, over time, the complexities, compromises, and hypocrisies of being in but not of the world were revealed. This, too, was neces-

sary instruction. I have been extremely fortunate to have faculty and classmates from that time as life-long friends.

Certainly, my experience in the mid-1970s cannot be generalized to others. Developmentally, I was predisposed by my upbringing, life circumstances, temperament, and age to experience these college years at Fresno Pacific as fundamentally life-informing. However, I am also certain that the intentionality of the faculty to live into the aspirations of the FP Idea created a unique environment that allowed this to happen. For someone who was drawn to literature and history at a time when sexist social pressures to be a school-teacher or a nurse persisted, I caught sight of an embodied expansive love that actively and publicly resists walls of segregation and marginalization and that still calls me to action today. Although I did initially pursue graduate studies in literature, after three years with Mennonite Central Committee in Poland, I switched to applied linguistics, and adult language acquisition specifically. This has allowed me to spend most of my adult life advocating for those who are systematically marginalized in school and work because they do not have the unearned privilege of Standard American English as their primary or only language/dialect.

Having spent most of my adult life studying and teaching in universities, both private and public, faith-based and secular, I have been able to observe up close how a compelling set of core values shared by faculty and administrators can inspire creativity, collegiality, and a dynamic education for students. I am profoundly thankful that I was a student in that kind of environment as an undergraduate, and that I am now once again part of a university community with a compelling vision of resisting injustice and promoting the common good, which we attempt to enact bit by bit, day by day, albeit often imperfectly.

