



Tough Minds, Tender Hearts

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Some years ago Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a sermon entitled "Tough Minds, Tender Hearts," in which he exhorted members of the congregation to embrace both concepts. He suggested that people of faith should be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." As Dr. King implied, acting like a snake and a dove at the same time seems oxymoronic.

Many have suggested that authentic Christian faith should always be about both the head and the heart. This should also be true of the academic enterprise, particularly at a place like Eastern Mennonite University. That very notion is embedded in the last phrase of our vision statement, a quotation from the prophet Micah, "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God." It also finds expression in the Gospel of Mark, the passage read for us a few minutes ago, where Jesus encourages us "to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength."

When I was in high school we had an annual "day out" every fall where we did some environmental education and engaged in friendly competition between the classes. One of the challenges was a "tug of war" between the juniors and seniors. It was not uncommon for the losing side to eventually give up and to suddenly release its collective grip on the rope—just to watch the "winning" side fall backwards on their tushes.

A tug of war is, for many of us, a metaphor for how we deal with questions of faith. Is faith primarily an intellectual reality or is it emotional? Head or heart? Is one persuaded by rational arguments for faith or is it experiential? By sermons or by music? Does one believe first and behave later, or live first and believe as a result? At different points in our lives we are tempted to abandon the tension and to let go of the rope.

Faith that is tough minded, but not tender hearted, is ultimately parched and dry, a faith that withers on the vine. Spreading fertilizer on the soul's garden but choosing not to water the plants always results in stunted growth. At high noon, in the sunshine of the

day, a tough minded faith is stimulating and inspiring; at 3:00 a.m., in the shadow of the night, one prays for a faith that "casts out all fear."

On the other end of the rope, faith that is tender hearted, but not tough minded is fragile and subject to the fads of the time. A tender hearted faith is breath taking on the mountain top but it wears very thin in the valleys of life. I need to know that God loves me, and God loves you, even when I am too emotionally drained to express that conviction.

So what does "tough minded, tender hearted," have to do with education in the context of a university that holds a Christian world view, is committed to an Anabaptist perspective, and stands in the liberal arts tradition? This is not simply a theoretical question. There are advocates for an education at EMU which would ignore, or at least sublimate, the critical intellectual conundrums of our day. For some, it would be most comfortable if we were located with those who see education as indoctrination. For them, the old motto for professors might be, "Know your stuff, know whom you are stuffing, then stuff them."

Besides the philosophical question of whether or not indoctrination would be a good mode of education, the sheer explosion of information renders indoctrination totally ineffective pedagogically. If we as professors can only pass along to the students that which we know, we will have failed and graduates can hardly be called educated. With the explosion of information and knowledge, we simply cannot keep up. Rather, it is our intention to model life-long learning as a way of being.

If we seek, at EMU, to be people who are tough minded and tender hearted, what might that mean in practical terms?

1. When in dialog, particularly with one with whom we disagree, we choose not vilify the other. Shouting louder to strengthen a weak intellectual argument is not productive.

A few years ago Pat and I were watching a high school basketball game when there was a disputed call by the ref as time ran out at the end of the game. We were sitting directly across the floor from the coach as he came roaring off the bench to protest the call. But just as he got in the face of the ref, and as he was beginning to scream at him, he lost his false teeth. They came flying out of his mouth-he had a few years on him but he was still very coordinated. He caught them in mid-air and never stopped yelling. I hope someone caught it on video.

Strange thing, the referee still won the argument! Can you imagine the conversation that happened in the ref's locker room after the game?

Some of us scream so vociferously we almost lose our teeth, but we rarely persuade others. We've all heard of the preacher who wrote in the margin of his sermon notes, "Weak point, speak louder."

Knowing what one believes and holding it firmly, is the beginning point for healthy dialog with another. The psychologists call it individuation. Being able to entertain a thought with which one disagrees is one sign of maturity. The best word picture I can imagine is that of holding our beliefs like a bird in the hand; one holds it tight enough so that it does not easily escape, but lightly enough so as not to squeeze the life out of it.

It seems to me that institutions must also have the ability to "individuate." EMU is not like all other institutions of higher education nor do we aspire to be like all others. We are prepared to consider other points of view, and we welcome new insights, but we do not enter into those discussions as an institution unclear about our identity.

2. Tough minds recognize that there are rarely just two points of view in the case of a controversial issue. Reducing complex issues to either/or extremes is intellectually dishonest. It is not relativism to acknowledge numerous points of view. Sometimes that is just the way it is. Many of the contentious discussions in our culture are reduced to thesis and antithesis, left or right, liberal or conservative, position and opposition. At the same time, let us be clear, just because there are numerous points of view does not mean that all of them are equally close to the truth.

Deborah Tannen's book, *The Argument Culture*, is a useful treatment of communication practices. Rather than dialog we tend only to debate. She calls it agonis. Listen to any group discussion and observe how few times a participant will affirm what has been said by another, even when things are said with which they agree. The argument culture drives us to focus on points of disagreement, even when we could agree on much of what has been said. Tannen asserts that this is particularly true in academia.

For those considering graduate studies, Tannen provides a rather interesting analysis. She suggests that "agonis" is so pervasive in academia that some graduate students literally struggle to fit into the culture. If one's personality is inclined to build bridges of commonality and to seek points of agreement, he/she may not be taken seriously by mentors and peers.

3. Tough minds, tender hearts resist using overly simplistic labels such as conservative and liberal. Over the past 30 years I have come to the conclusion that these labels are not very useful in our life together as a church or in society. For one reason, I doubt that any of us can assert we are consistently "conservative" or "liberal" without asking deeper questions. And, I would humbly suggest, that if one argues he/she is always conservative or liberal we might ask if he/she has a assume a tender mind and/or a tough heart!

EMU stands in the tradition of the liberal arts. We hold ourselves to high standards of intellectual pursuit-developing tough minds to engage a world of fuzzy thinkers is a worthy pursuit. We will proclaim that it is indeed possible to "love God with our minds."

We are simultaneously invited to love God with our hearts, the center of our emotions. We are more human when we cultivate our appreciation of great music and art and

literature. We in the liberal arts tradition have understood that education is not primarily utilitarian-it is not simply about training for a job. It is about being liberated to enjoy all of God's creation even as we engage the mundane in life.

Late last summer Pat and I were walking through small boutiques and galleries in New Hope PA, and a little sign caught my attention, "Without art we are just monkeys with car keys."

Some years ago I called on an elderly parishioner who insisted no astronaut had ever set foot on the moon. To her, it was simply another television show. Her worldview could not incorporate something so unimaginable.

A tough minded approach would have been to argue with her, to attempt to convince her that Neil Armstrong really did take "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." But this was not a class in astronomy or history. She wasn't concerned about whether this question was on the test or if her beliefs would affect her GPA! This was an elderly woman whose life had witnessed so much change that her psychological equilibrium was challenged. The tough mind could not agree with her, but the tender heart had to move the conversation to the real underlying issue, to listen to her discomfort with a world that is simply unexplainable.

Years later, while watching the movie, "Wag the Dog," I remembered that rather strange conversation with Grammy Landis. Where is the boundary between physical and virtual reality? Perhaps she was right after all. Perhaps what we thought we first witnessed in the summer of '69 was actually taking place in some Hollywood studio! I don't think so!

The vision, mission, and values statements of this university include words that are "tough minded" and "tender hearted." Academic excellence, creative process, professional competence, passionate Christian faith. We commit ourselves to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Scholarly inquiry, artistic creation.

Our church, our communities, our culture needs tough minds. It is an act of worship to sharpen one's intellect when one believes that we were created by God for a purpose and in God's image. Blurry thinking is not the hallmark of spirituality as some would have us believe. Truth claims need to be tested in the context of a discerning group of believers who are willing to struggle with ambiguity and complexity.

The 13th chapter of Romans opens with a familiar phrase which instructs us to obey the governing authorities for they have been established by God; seems straightforward, no need for interpretation.

But it takes on a very different meaning depending on the political location of the reader. An American who reads that statement in 2004 may understand it in certain ways. What about her ancestors who were reading the passage in the early 1770s? One could facetiously assume that those ancestors were opposed to the Revolutionary War-after

all Paul instructs us to obey the governing authorities. This is hardly a manifesto for a revolution!

Equally confounding is the question of how this passage is to be read by Christians of many countries around the world today.

Eastern Mennonite University is about the business of honing tough minds that confront these difficult questions. In fact, we dare to say that it is our calling as a Christian university in the Anabaptist tradition to celebrate intellectual achievement.

EMU is also about the business of developing tender hearts. Our graduates are among the best in medicine, in education in social work, in English literature, in conflict transformation, etc. Our alums, who are serving all over the world, are not contributing with weak minds. But, they are even more effective because they have tender hearts. Developing tender hearts, among many other reasons, drives our intention to have every student experience the discomfort of a cross-cultural milieu.

It was a Monday afternoon when I was called to the Grand View Hospital in Sellersville PA. A nine year old boy from our congregation had collapsed at home after becoming ill the previous evening. The prognosis was grim. I arrived at the emergency room just in time to sit with the parents as the attending physician came out to deliver the awful news-there was nothing she could do to revive him. In less than 24 hours he had gone from being a normal, healthy third grader to death. The doctor offered a very brief comment to the parents, turned to me and said, "You may go with them to perform last rites." And then she quickly disappeared.

I don't mean to make light of the sacraments of other traditions-but it could have been rather obvious to anyone paying attention that I was not a priest. Someone came out of the treatment room and invited the parents and me to be with their son. It was a gut-wrenching but holy moment.

What occurred to me later was that if the physician could have just stayed with the parents and me for as little as five minutes, even if she had not said anything (for there was little to be said, I'm sure), a tender heart at that point would have communicated so well. I know she was busy, and I know that the training of physicians has changed over the years-to allow them more freedom to experience the full range of human emotions. She was, no doubt, responding as one who was taught to heal, not to deal with the limitations of human ability. Make no mistake, we want physicians who possess tough minds. When my cardiologist is doing open heart surgery on me I don't want him or her crying into the surgical field because he or she cares so much for me. But, when I'm dying I do want a physician who can enter my world and acknowledge my reality. Tough minds, tender hearts-I want both in my teachers, my pastors, my physicians.

Each morning I receive an email from the Moravian Church which outlines Scripture readings for the day according to the lectionary calendar. Hear the words of this prayer that was sent with the readings on December 11:

Forgive us for thinking that others have soft heads and hard hearts,
when we are often the ones afflicted by both. Help us to be more open
with our hearts, more knowledgeable with our heads, and more generous in
spirit. Amen