

The Depths: What a Seattle U. Education Can Do to Your minds

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Welcome to Seattle University and welcome to the first day of your academic engagement with this university and its faculty. A Seattle U. education begins here: “Day One”! Take note of what we choose to address today, who does it, how it is done, and from this “Day One” involve yourselves actively and thoughtfully in the subject of this academic day and your university education.

As the president of the university I have invited you to come together with your professors in this first encounter. It is like my introduction of you to one another, and then, after this, leaving it up to your professors and you to get about together what a Seattle U. education is all about. I thank you for choosing Seattle U.; we’ve been looking forward to you; we are eager to have you now as our students, as active members of our educational community. I thank in advance your professors, advisors, and mentors for how dedicated they are to your learning and growth. We say this clearly in the first two values of our mission statement:

- 1) We put the good of the students first.
- 2) We value excellence in learning with great teachers who are active scholars.

That says it all. So let’s get about it.

You read a book in preparation for this day and this beginning called: The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains. I read it too and thought it was an excellent choice to provoke a great first university discussion. I’m curious to know what you made of it and how much you agree with it or will push back against it. Nicholas Carr’s basic thesis is that today’s universal medium, the Internet, a technology which is absorbing more and more of our lives and from which there is no going back once it is woven into all of our lives, is actually changing our brains, rewiring them, by our repeated, almost addictive, quick-paced flitting back and forth between small digital pieces of information as we skip easily and distractedly in the shallows of the mind. This, he argues, is weakening our ability to read calmly, undistractedly, thoughtfully, deeply, reflecting on what we read as it shapes our minds, memories, and even our humanity by the depth and integration of thought in our reading. It is critical—especially at the start of a Jesuit university education—to discuss this thesis, not shallowly, but deeply. By the way of a welcome from your university president and, in my introduction of you the students and the professors as the discussion partners of your education, let me indicate some of my thoughts about this.

My first thought was a rather humorous one. Carr’s discussion of how the Internet is replacing the former technology of the book, called to mind something Walter Isaacson once wrote:

“Imagine if we’d been getting all of our information on electronic screens for four hundred years, and then some modern-day Gutenberg came along and took the words and

pictures and put them onto nicely designed pages that we could read in the bathtub or bus or backyard. We'd be impressed. We might even declare that paper was such a good technology it would replace the Internet someday."

In other words, what if Gutenberg were Google, and some wizard like Steve Jobs came along with this incredibly portable and multi-use device called paper. Not likely to have happened but fun to imagine!

To get serious, first of all I sat down and read the book in about five hour-and-a-half peaceful, reflective, undistracted, enjoyable sessions. Then, like Nathaniel Hawthorne finding peace and reflection at Sleepy Hollow in Concord, Massachusetts, I walked around Green Lake here in Seattle: 2.8 miles on a path around calm waters in the early morning with the ducks and rising fish. Green Lake—the 45 minutes to walk it briskly—I refer to as my Thinking Pad, perhaps my I-Pad. That's where I thought about this book. In effect, in conversation with Nicholas Carr, I composed a book in my head entitled The Depths: What a Seattle U. Education Can Do to Your Minds.

My book begins with the argument that what we experience whether about ourselves, or about the world, or through intellectual disciplines, is Mystery, not problems like a huge jigsaw puzzle to be solved by finding the right bits of knowledge which fit the puzzle, but an ever-expanding Mystery, which we do not try to solve but with which we engage ever more fully and deeply. Deep is more important than shallow, because self, and life, and world is more Mystery than puzzle or problem.

An easy way into this is to realize that if on a clear night you look up into the sky, all of the stars you see are part of our one galaxy, called The Milky Way. There are about 200 million stars in this galaxy of ours. The nearest star among these 200 million is 25 trillion miles away from us. Then, if you can, realize that our galaxy is not the only one or one of several, but that there are a billion galaxies. There may even be multi-universes. Of course, we should seek to know all we can possibly know about the world, but ultimately we must stand before it as a Mystery, and we must do something from that stance. It is not a standing in the shallows but in the depths.

The scientists of the principal brain research center in Seattle, funded by Paul Allen with billions of dollars, say that before we can even begin to understand how artificial intelligence might work, we need to begin to understand how human intelligence works. They humbly admit that the human brain is so complex that all brain research—of which there is much in Carr's book—is like what we know of our planetary system and about our galaxy compared to the billion galaxies of the universe. The human brain itself—however much we are tempted to think of it as a machine—is itself ultimately a Mystery beyond human knowing. As we speak of deep space, so the brain itself is deep mystery.

Dr. Lee Hartwell, Nobel-Prize-winning scientist of Seattle and recipient of an honorary degree from Seattle U., kept coming back to scientists and philosophers and theologians here because he was troubled from his experience as a researcher about how science is understood and taught. He believed that science was being presented as gradually, bit by bit, filling in all of the previously unknown spaces of the great jigsaw puzzle such that the unknown would be overcome. Rather, he claims, his research in physiology, biochemistry, and genetics was

actually not shrinking the unknown but greatly expanding it, in that everything discovered by research opened a door to a much greater realm of the unknown. So, he says, there is actually much more unknown today, not less, than there used to be! He wanted to talk with scientists, philosophers, and theologians at Seattle U. because he was beginning to think that all knowing is rooted in Mystery, ultimately in the Mystery of the human person, and he thought that we should know something about that at a Jesuit and Catholic university. Dr. Hartwell had gone as deep as you can go and found not knowledge but Mystery and he came to us because he rightly knew we are a university based on and honoring Mystery.

As I was walking around Green Lake, my Thinking Pad, doing something with my deep reading of The Shallows, I came upon a Great Blue Heron. Herons, do not stand in the depths, but in the shallows, poised patiently with their long necks and needle sharp beaks over the still, shallow waters to plunge suddenly and come up with a fish wriggling sideways in its pinchers, to be flipped and taken down straight and whole and delicious. I thought maybe Carr in The Shallows has it too black and white and that the issue with the Internet is not that it is the shallows, but that like the heron we need to know how to stand in the shallows and to be patient and to know when to plunge for just the right, living, delicious morsels of knowledge for our deeper digestion. Clearly, we are in a transitional time needing to learn how to use the irreversible, universal medium for our deeper human purposes rather than be used by it in a diminished humanity. I can't help but believe that you the students and you the professors in this transitional time of challenge and opportunity can together find the best way of education for a deeper humanity and a fuller service of our world.

Let me ask you some questions. They all revolve around exploring what “deeper” might mean in your education and your use of it for a more just and humane world. Here are my questions—I hope you will add your own:

- What would a deeper strategy of U.S. involvement in the Middle East look like?
- Do we need a deeper diversity on our own Seattle U. campus? What would that be?
- What does an education for a deeper exercise of citizenship require?
- Do we as a Jesuit university have a unique contribution to make to a deeper dialogue of world religions?
- I know your great cause is environmentalism; but what would a deeper environmentalism mean to you and make possible for you?
- You will all be engaged in a new Core Curriculum; how much deeper will it make your whole education and major?
- You will all be involved in the Seattle University Youth Initiative with the kids and families of our neighborhood; can you make it deeper for them and for yourselves?
- What is a deeper understanding than you currently have of the economy, of business, of ethics, of healthcare, and of justice?

- How do the arts add depth to your understanding of yourself, others, and the world?
- How deep do you want to go in the exploration of your spirituality and its manifestations in faith, community, religion, and service?
- What will a deeper global education and engagement ask of you?
- What will a deeper preparation in college for a career of meaning involve from your first year to your last?

These are some of my thoughts as president in welcoming you to this Academic Day and introducing you to your professors. I am confident that in choosing Seattle U. you have made the best choice for what you are seeking and I am confident that you want and are ready for an education of depth. Thanks for your trust in us. Know also our trust in you, and our joy that you are now our university students.

Let me tell you a brief story from the gospels, which is relevant to what I have said and to your start at Seattle U.

As Jesus stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd pressed in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats moored by the side of the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a short distance from the shore; then, remaining seated, he continued to teach the crowds from the boat.

When he finished speaking he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have been hard at it all night long and have caught nothing; but if you say so, I will lower the nets."

Upon doing this they caught such a great number of fish that their nets were at the breaking point. They signaled to their mates in the other boat to come and help them. These came, and together they filled the two boats until they nearly sank.

Lk 5: 1-7

Let me encourage you to do the following:

- Do get out on your lake a short distance from where you've been.
- Listen to the teaching of your professors.
- It may feel at times that you are toiling hard and catching nothing.
- Then put out into deep waters—your own deep waters—and lower your nets for a catch.
- Be surprised at what you catch in these depths of yourself.

- Share what you catch with others for you will be filled to the breaking point.

Good luck on the deep waters of Seattle U.

That's a story from the gospels and some learnings from it. Let me end with the story of an experience I had which also is like a gospel parable and which I save for new first year students and only tell once a year. Here it is; it's famous; it's called "The Hike".

Like most Seattleites I love to hike. On the Saturday of Labor Day Weekend a few years ago I decided to take a more-than-usually rigorous hike up a trail in the nearby Cascade Mountain Range. It just happened to be 85 degrees that day.

I packed a lunch: non-fat turkey with non-fat cream cheese on whole wheat bread, non-fat bran muffin, apple juice, trail mix... yes, I'm a Seattleite. I prepared a canteen of water, took my trusty blue daypack, cap, hiking boots, and headed east into the mountains on I-90. Then off on a long road in and up to the trailhead. I was looking forward to the 5-hour hike with a gain of altitude of about 3,000 feet. When I got to the trailhead and was putting on my gear, I realized that the canteen of water was not there. I'd left it on the counter in the kitchen. What was I do to?

There was no place to get water and I was not about to go all the way back nor was I willing to abandon the hike. So I said to myself: "Well, yes it's 85 degrees, and it's three hours in and two hours out, and it's a gain of 3,000 feet, and I don't have any water, but I can do it! They say you need water; but you don't really; I mean what's going to happen; I'm not going to die or something. I'll just go without."

So up the trail I go. After a gain of 1,000 feet, maybe an hour in, I was really thirsty and thinking about it all the time. Then I remembered I had a 4-ounce can of apple juice in my lunch in the pack. So I drank that, one gulp, and headed along carrying this little empty can. Within moments I was thirsty, dry, and worried again. But what was I to do? Then I decided that I would beg for water from passing hikers. A tough decision.

Soon I met a couple coming down. I said to them "Excuse me, but can I speak with you, I forgot to bring along any water; could you spare a little water?" The first person said, "Well, I don't know, I'm not sure we have enough for ourselves." But the second person said, "Sure, we have enough. Why don't I fill up your little can there, you drink it, and then I'll fill it up again and you can take it along with you." Wow!

So now I am moving along at about 1,500 elevation gain holding a 4-ounce apple juice can of water! Well suddenly I realize the sky is bluer than I've ever seen, the air purer, the rock cliff to my right more visibly sculptured than I'd ever noticed, birds singing, and a glorious play of a distant waterfall across the ravine! A hike I'd done a dozen times was fresh, new, transformed by a begged, 4-ounce can of water.

But soon I was bone-dry again, thirsty, dusty-throated. So again I did the same thing. Again the first person of the couple didn't know if they had enough—probably in reality this big dry,

desperate guy approaching them in the wilds scared them—but the second said “Sure”. And this time I suggested the two-times-four-ounce-apple-juice-can trick! And again the beggar boy was walking on a new trail and with a song in his heart.

But that too ran out and I was hurting and I was still short of the summit. One last try. Along came another pair of hikers. Same routine: “Excuse me, can I ask you for something; I forgot to bring along any water, could you spare a little?”. Identical response from the first of the pair about not being sure they had enough to get all the way down. But good old #2 came through again. She asked, “Is all you’ve got that little can?”; actually I think she said “silly little can”. She took out a clear plastic liter bottle filled with water and a huge ice chunk in it. She began to pour some out into another small bottle. I thought: “How nice she’s going to pour a bit of ice water for me”. At that point, she handed me the whole big bottle with the ice chunk in it, and she said “Here, sir, and it says in the bible that if you give a cup of water to another in my name, you shall not lose your reward...so I want you to praise God every time you drink from this bottle!” I almost said to her, “Hey, I’m Catholic, we don’t do that sort of thing”, but I didn’t, and by the way you’ve got to realize I look like any other bloke out hiking; tee-shirt, shorts and cap and boots; no priestly black and collar. I thanked them and off I went.

Here I soon was at the summit of the trail, drinking abundant ice-cold water, taking in the transformed panorama, and a whole symphony playing back and forth between me and the whole mountain range. And I’d started out with no water, with just one, silly indeed, can of apple juice.

You too, our new students, are at the start of a hiking trail which is your upward journey at Seattle U. You may feel you don’t have enough in your backpack for the whole climb. That’s okay; in fact that’s great. Ask for help along the way; beg for water from professors, classmates, advisors, coaches, mentors. If you do, you too will find the journey and the mountain transformed as you go. There is a summit for you with a symphony. It is called “Commencement”. Welcome to Seattle U., its depths and its heights.