

SIGNIFICANCE OF AN INTERNATIONAL GATHERING
OF MERCY SECONDARY EDUCATORS: We All Learned to Go Sky High

Let me begin with a word of gratitude and admiration for the efforts of our colleagues in the Mercy Secondary Education Association - Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas who chose to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary by occasioning an international gathering of Mercy secondary educators. Your vision and your energy are a blessing on us all!

I have been asked to begin this auspicious moment with some initial reflections on the significance of an international gathering of Mercy secondary educators (**Slide #1**). I am a bit reluctant to do so as my own life experience suggests that significance is often discovered looking backward rather than gazing on the present moment: who would have seen in the early struggles of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks a successful resistance movement; who would have suspected decades of church upheaval in the selection of a rotund peasant-pope; or envisioned a worldwide network of service from a small group of socialites establishing a house on Baggot Street (Dublin, Ireland).

On the other hand, I am also delighted to do so precisely because significance is a dynamic phenomenon. Significance depends on the subject and the object, on the interaction between beholder and that which is beheld, on interpretation as well as being/action. Assigning significance to an event attunes us to hidden sources of meaning and deepens our engagement in the event itself. Both of these activities enrich the dynamic possibility of significance.

In true Mercy spirit, I will engage this complex task, do my best, and trust that you will make up what is wanting with thoughts of your own as these days unfold.

My remarks this evening will be organized in three parts. Each section will be introduced by a selection from Ireland's wonderful Nobel-winning poet, Seamus Heaney.

His works will offer a backdrop for thoughts within two story lines and around three significations:

(Slide #2) The story lines are two:

Her-story (past in which the present lies)

Our-story (present in which the future lies)

(Slide #3) The significations are three and come through

the lens of quantum theory

the lens of our ministry of secondary education

the lens of the challenge of collaboration

We all learned one by one to go sky high.
Then town lands vanished into aerodromes,
Hiroshima made light of human bones,
Concorde's neb migrated towards the future.
So who were we to want to hang back there
in spite of all?

In spite of all, we sailed
Beyond ourselves and over and above
The rafters aching in our shoulder blades,
The give and take of branches in our arms.

--"The Swing" from Opened Ground (1998) by Seamus Heaney

Her-story (past in which the present lies)

"We all learned one by one to go sky high...beyond ourselves." We also learned together—those of us gathered here—"to go sky high...beyond ourselves." Hence, *one signification of our gathering is its profound example of what quantum theorists term the reality of relationships (Slide #4):* nothing exists independent of its relationship with something else. According to the new sciences organizations are organisms; that is, living sets of interactive patterns/relationships that occur horizontally and vertically through time.

Catherine McAuley began her work with a simple desire to relieve suffering and ignorance in the lives of persons in her beloved Dublin, especially her Catholic brothers and sisters among whom both realities were particularly acute. We gather here today—nearly 18 decades later—carried by a flow of energy moving outward from that simple desire [Slide #5 – Great Britain (1839) – Newfoundland (1842) – United States of America (1843) – Australia (1846) – New Zealand (1850) – South America (1856) – Central America/Caribbean (1890s) - Africa (1898) - Philippines (1954)] - and backward [Slide #6], through all those decades, to the place where it all began.

An initial set of relationships begun in nineteenth-century Ireland continues today to grow and evolve in an amazing configuration and reconfiguration of energy and purpose [Slide #7]. We gather in that energy. We gather on behalf of that energy. We gather to nurture and renew and transform that energy. The universe has been preparing for this gathering since its beginning.

An early whispering was heard and recorded in a letter of Cecilia Maher, written from New Zealand in 1849 to her companions in Ireland (Carlow): “May our next meeting be a happy one...Though separated entirely, our hearts will all be united, and after this dream of life, we shall, please God, meet from Pittsburgh, Ireland, New Zealand. We shall all be together, too, please God, in heaven." The MSEA Board during the celebration of its 20th anniversary heard the whisperings of that expectation and cooperated mightily in their dream of an international conference of Mercy secondary educators.

*We all learned one by one to go sky high.
Then townlands...Hiroshima...Concorde's neb*

(Slide #8) *A second signification of our gathering is the affirmation it occasions for the ministry of secondary education – a ministry that traces its deepest root to this city and to the Centre we will visit on Saturday. A long line of participants in our Mercy tradition have seen, as Catherine saw, that education is a most powerful means—perhaps the most powerful means—to better lives, to occasion systemic change, to move toward a world in which mercy and justice shall meet. Education, at its best, processes a changing world (Hiroshimas, Concordes, Afghanistans, Dafurs, Internets, Pacific rims, Ballywoods) and offers tools that address the need to “sail beyond ourselves” for “who are we to want to hang back there in spite of all?”*

Austin Carroll, a Sister of Mercy prominent in the expansion of Catherine's vision to the southern frontiers of the United States, speaks to this enduring, humane task of education **(Slide #9)**: "Genuine education will not sharpen the wits and neglect the heart.... Education brings us in contact with the great minds of every age and teaches us how to value their splendid qualities while avoiding their errors...while instructing us in literature, science, or art, [genuine education] insists that we be honest and honorable."

Austin Carroll's 1886 essay entitled "What is True Education?" echoes many of the concerns heard today in faculty rooms, head mistress's offices, and educational conferences:

(Slide #10) It is almost as rare to find a pupil who speaks [English] correctly as it is to find a black swan out of Australia...[The] glaring incorrectness of colloquial speech passes to written language. And the relation between spoken and written words, which old-fashioned people style spelling, is based rather upon phonetic principles unconsciously applied than upon the rules....A general absence of a taste for reading is another curious consequence of the 'universal education' of which we hear so much...In social life...never before were deceit, hardheartedness, utter prostration before wealth, fashion, and every form of worldliness so rampant. Commercially, never were the relations between labor and

capital so unsatisfactory, not to say inhuman, as is evidenced by frequent strikes and upheavals and in many other less emphatic ways.¹

“*To see beyond ourselves and over and above...*,” persons must know a context and a meaning that provides a reason for education and a purpose for life itself. As Mercy educators our reason and purpose comes from the rich tradition of Roman Catholicism in which we stand. Catholicism recognizes that Jesus the Christ entered the universe story, thereby blessing both time and human experience. The context of our educational effort is a world already-but-not-yet redeemed. We do not wish to “sharpen the wits and neglect the heart,” rather our hope is to educate our students “in literature, science, or art,” while we assist them to live in ways that are “honest and honorable.”

Students, faculty and staff, in addition to being respected as individuals, must also grow to understand that we are participants of a larger reality than our own self-contained uniqueness. All of us need to learn continually how to live well in a universe of living beings in living systems all of which deserve their full-flourishing.

*The rafters aching in our shoulder blades,
The give and take of branches in our arms.*

This may be stretching the poet’s meaning a bit, but I hear in those last two lines a sense of co-laboring and communion: the sinew of rafter and muscle participate together in the effort to “*go sky high*” – the web of nature sustains and supports the effort to “*sail beyond ourselves.*”

(Slide #11) *A third signification of our gathering lies in its challenge to think more and more concretely of the possibilities we have to share one another’s gifts, to bear one another’s burdens, and to enrich one another’s worldviews. Catherine*

¹Mary Austin Carroll, "What is True Education?" in The Catholic World, Volume XLIII, Number 255 (June, 1886), p. 408-411.

McAuley accounted for the beginnings of the Sisters of Mercy with a direct acknowledgement of collaboration: "It commenced with two, Sister Doyle and I..." Catherine did not think of the order of Mercy as beginning with herself, but rather with herself in relationship. In Catherine's mind, the congregation began in a context of common effort and mutual responsibility.

Catherine encouraged the independent activity of her numerous foundations while, at the same time, engaging all in the common project—the spiritual and corporeal works of mercy—that was the purpose of the congregation. Collaboration among and between early Mercy benefactors, colleagues, congregational members and persons of good will seemed always in relation to this common project. Indeed, this sense of a common endeavor motivated all manner of persons in Catherine's time in Ireland and England. In succeeding generations, the vast expanses of North America, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and elsewhere this common project created for our ancestors in Mercy "one heart and one soul in God." Such clarity of purpose impelled to greater generosity and responsiveness even as diversity of works and the anonymity of distance challenged their collaboration and interdependence in day-to-day engagements. An amazing network of letters, persons, practices, influences and ideas interconnect the numerous centers of Mercy energy throughout space and time. Your various educational associations and, now, this gathering represent the latest rather than the first iteration of this phenomenon.

In an age in which youth culture spans global reality and corporations have learned to speak a thousand languages for the sake of profit and religious and social ideologues gather their followers in all of our countries, our collaboration becomes a

matter of utmost importance. We must, in the words of Adrienne Rich, “take ourselves more seriously, or die.” How do we define the common project in which we all co-labor? How do we discover ways to be conscious of that collaboration and to be deliberate in fostering its possibility?

(Slide #12) Collaboration with the individual and collective story in which we find ourselves is a fundamental task of each human life. Co-laboring with our particular collective—Catholic and Mercy—story – a story that suggests practical works of mercy and justice that occasion communities of service in a world of division and fragmentation - is our common project—a task, perhaps, more significant today than ever before.

Our-story(present in which the future lies)

Such division and fragmentation as well as the importance of a common story is the subject of a lengthy poem by Seamus Heaney, “Station Island.” The poem, from Seamus Heaney: Selected Poems (1966-1987) (1990), unfolds through twelve distinct sections. The images are startling and fierce. Two different characters speak lines that bear repetition here because they suggest a contribution we might make to the on-going struggle to educate out of a story that highlights practical works of mercy and justice through communities of service:

*‘I know, I know, I know, I know,’ he said,
‘but you have to try to make sense of what comes.
Remember everything and keep your head.
...We[humans] are earthworms of the earth, and all that
has gone through us is what will be our trace.’ (II)*

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*‘Forgive the way I [we] have lived indifferent—
Forgive my [our] timid circumspect involvement,’*

I surprised myself by saying... (VII)

'We[humans] are earthworms of the earth, and all that has gone through us is what will be our trace.' (II)

The universe evolves in its own mysterious progression, but the development of the human species depends to a great extent on conscious choices made by people such as you and me, our students and faculty and staff (Slide #13). Hence, a fourth signification of our gathering lies in quantum theory's discovery of the sustaining presence of invisible fields and fractals in all reality. This scientific discovery affirms our sense of the importance of vision and purpose in "making sense of what comes" – and authenticates the efforts we expend to maintain clarity about our deep story as Mercy and as Catholic.

Dynamic processes continually create and recreate our universe. Reality is a constant rhythm of chaos and order. Tensions and upheavals—disturbances, in the language of chaos theorists—seem necessary to push all living beings to new choices and new configurations. The presence in the universe of invisible fields and stable patterns—fractals—moves living systems to reconfigure themselves in the face of life-threatening disturbances.

Indeed, invisible fields and fractals provide inner direction to all living systems so that they choose to integrate new elements in their environment in such a way that their own well-being is safeguarded. Heaney's poem speaks to the critical role of meaning and memory in human life: "*you have to try to make sense of what comes.... remember everything and keep your head.*" His image of the earthworm suggests also the need for

integration, literally working through our own life-system the ever-ancient, ever-new meanings from faith and reason.

(Slide #14) The earthworm is not simply a conduit for the matter that passes through it. This little creature breaks down organic matter in various stages of death and decay and creates valuable nutrients from this organic matter. The earthworm then returns these ingredients to enrich the soil so that new life can thrive. Careful integration of knowledge, beliefs, and values—breaking down cold knowledge into living nutrients-- may be for the human species our earthworm process. Such integration returns the organic matter of human knowledge to enrich the soil of a culture in which life can thrive. Since all that has gone through us will be our trace upon the world, it behooves us to be selective in our teaching and in the moral and intellectual skills we nurture in our young people. As Mercy educators, what will be our “trace upon the world”?

(Slide #15) *A fifth signification of our gathering is the context it offers for an analysis of the ministry of Mercy secondary education in relation to the world which we live.* Education is always a biased activity. Educational institutions—public or private-- do not simply educate. All institutions educate from a particular standpoint and with a particular purpose. An educational institution that is clear about its standpoint and deliberate in its purpose needs also to place its educational endeavors in the broadest possible context and educate with an understanding of the world in which its graduates will live and contribute. The task of education is always to draw students, colleagues, and ourselves from ignorance (not-knowing) to knowing and to awareness. The task suggests a need to move out of the familiar, the defined, and the habitual; to think beyond the present order to new worlds and new systems. The “marbling of civilizations and peoples” today requires that we stretch attitudes and mindsets to new levels of cultural appreciation, religious diversity and global relatedness.

Such appreciation, diversity and relatedness will offer some antidote to---in the language of *Gaudium et Spes*---three dramatic features of today’s world, generating

varied aspirations and yearnings in many peoples: racism, fundamentalism and relativism, and globalization (**Slide #16**). Each of these features offers signification for a gathering of Mercy educators as each of them offers an opportunity to engage God's presence and God's saving activity in our work together – to avoid a need to seek forgiveness for “*the way we have lived indifferent...for our timid circumspect involvement*”.

(Slide #17) Racism is a systemic reality. While it is based on individual racial prejudice, this individual prejudice becomes racism only when one group's prejudices are enforced by the systems and institutions of a society, giving power and privilege to certain members of that society based on racial identity. The insidious presence of racism in our families, our institutions, our churches and our countries necessitates constant vigilance and repentance – and renewed promises to grow toward more and more respectful attitudes toward cultures and races different from our own. If even a portion of the predictions relative to the future complexion and composition of the church and the world prove true, we who enjoy “white power and privilege” have a great deal of work ahead to ready ourselves for that future (e.g., by the year 2025, Christians in first world countries, predominantly Anglo-European cultures, will comprise slightly less than one-fourth of all the world's Christians).

We must deepen and expand our efforts to develop attitudes of interdependence among people of diverse cultures. This requires of all of us a learner's stance in relation to the social, economic, and political realities of peoples of color and peoples of cultural and racial experiences other than those represented by most of us in this room this evening. This is perhaps the lens through which to understand collaboration in today's world—co-laboring with peoples of cultures other than our own, listening and learning from their experiences, allowing their experiences to shape our lives. Only together can we hope to bring about a world in which all of us can flourish.

(Slide #18) Fundamentalism and relativism also mark, and in many instances mar, the interaction of peoples in today's world. Fundamentalist movements in political, social, and religious venues strive to carve out meaning in the flux of human experience by establishing narrow boundaries for and interpretations of the good life. In these movements, individual expression and creative insight are often stifled for the sake of uniformity and predictability. Equally disturbing to human flourishing is the growth of relativism in so many venues of human experience, the proliferation of attitudes and worldviews that deconstruct the value of accumulated human knowledge and/or moral teaching and/or collective wisdom in favor of individual insight in this moment in this experience.

My interest this evening, and I hope our interest as educators, lies in the worldwide movements of **religious fundamentalism and relativism**. Those of us who educate in settings enriched by a Mercy and Catholic story have a difficult path to walk between these two religious "isms," both of which, for quite different reasons, have yielded a generation or more of persons in our educational settings whose knowledge of Church history, the grand tradition of religious doctrine and moral principles is, at best, sketchy and, at worst, wanting.

In such a world, we find ourselves apologizing for our faith tradition, relegating its rich history to instances of aberration and its grand schema for the full-flourishing of creation to limiting doctrinal pronouncements and authoritarian persons that seem "*indifferent...in their timid circumspect involvement*" in the critical struggles of this time in planetary experience. Our students deserve and need the benefit of a Catholicism that reveals nuances of doctrinal evolution, the dynamism of a faith (always) seeking

understanding by its careful engagement of human history. Augustine's day saw this engagement – and Aquinas' day –and Chardin's day. Our day, too, needs to enter the dynamism of Catholicism – to know its inner being well enough to understand the strange attractors in our modern age which will lead to greater faithfulness and deeper redemption and those strange attractors which threaten the lifeline of our religious tradition and dissipate its rich energy toward the full-flourishing of God's creation. Boundaries drawn too tightly will stifle life. Boundaries flung too far a field dissipate life. Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Dominican Order, describes the crucial place of conversation in attempting to work through the divisions in Roman Catholicism as we enter the twenty-first century:

The central sacrament of the church...gathers in and reaches out...We need both...a fruitful and living tension between Kindom Catholics (pilgrim people of God) and Communion Catholics (identity and inner life)...Roman stresses the clear identity we have...Catholic stresses the outreach for what is universal.²

Vitality lies in careful interaction and discerning choices. Educators stand in a prime moment to influence both the interaction and the discernment.

A final context in which our education occurs today is the phenomenon of **globalization (Slide #19)**. There are many definitions of this phenomenon. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, in an address given at Harvard University in 1998 defines globalization in relation to economic advances in technology and communication: “globalization is commonly understood to describe those advances in technology and communication that have made possible an unprecedented degree of financial and economic interdependence and growth.” Financial and economic

²Timothy Radcliffe, “Overcoming Discord in the Church” in The National Catholic Reporter (May 5, 2006), p. 6.

interdependence is not a new phenomenon in human history – sixth- and seventh-century influences of the Muslim empire on Western (European) culture; fifteenth-century movements of explorers and merchants, East to West and North to South; nineteenth-century colonization and industrial expansion. This moment is unprecedented because the interdependence is happening simultaneously and globally, creating one worldwide economy and one worldwide financial system.

This moment has potential for great suffering and oppression because we lack global institutions—legislative, judicial, military—to monitor human behaviors within this interdependence and to protect vulnerable persons and peoples. This moment has potential also for positive changes in our way of living as citizens of Earth: awareness of other people, their cultures and religions and a deep appreciation of diversity can forge greater humanness in our actions. Integration and partnership is enhanced through shared experiences. We have here a new opportunity to build the social order envisioned in Gospel writings. We have a new possibility to create a spirituality of inclusion for our global world.

*‘Forgive the way I [we] have lived indifferent—
Forgive my [our] timid circumspect involvement.’ (VII)*

(Slide #20) A final signification of our gathering lies in its challenge to think more and more concretely of the possibilities we have to share one another’s gifts, to bear one another’s burdens, and to enrich one another’s worldviews.

We cannot be expected to dramatically heal the fractured relationships that mark our world today, but we can be expected to strengthen relationships important to us and to link our collective energy—what the 2002 Mercy International Justice Conference termed “our social capital”—to seriously engage the works of mercy and justice across

national, ethnic, and cultural differences. Each setting needs to arrange for the collection of information and the direction of action in matters requiring systemic responses: poverty, hunger, ecology, immigration, refugees. The Mercy International Association recently released a vision for the twenty-first century which calls all Mercy persons and entities to work together “to address global poverty and its current demonstration in the massive displacement of persons worldwide.” Where/how will our secondary education settings embrace, enhance and implement this worthy goal?

Caring for one’s neighbor, responding to the needs of persons who are sick and dying, respecting each person’s dignity, welcoming the stranger, suffering with and turning toward the sufferer, acting in community and with a sense of the other--all these activities have a long tradition in Christian living and, indeed, can be documented in common practices throughout the history of Christianity. Living transmission requires, however, adaptations and reconfigurations. The actions of justice in Galilee during the Roman occupation, in nineteenth-century Ireland during the potato famines, in global realities of the twentieth-century with a growing disparity between those persons with wealth and those persons without means are quite different actions, but the pattern of right relationship remains constant. The standards of excellence in Catherine’s nineteenth-century Dublin and our twenty-first century settings reflect changing knowledge and expectations, but the effort to act from one’s potential remains constant.

As the Book of Revelation proclaims: “God is always making all things new” (Revelations 21:5). All of us participate by the gift of the Spirit in efforts to break forth this new heaven and new earth. Collaboration, then, co-laboring, is important because our God intends something new among us as a community of believers. Co-laboring

with others is the sacred place where we are likely to receive the revelation of God. Collaborating also with the processes and movements of our time and place is equally the sacred context where we are likely to meet our God.

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 Then town lands vanished into aerodromes,
 Hiroshima made light of human bones,
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