Luther College at 150: A Place for Student Transformations

By Dale Nimrod

The essays of this series have tried to encapsulate important episodes in Luther’s history. This one, in contrast, suggests that the most important transformations may not be institutional ones. Rather, perhaps, they are the transformations that occur in individual students during the four years that they live and study at this residential, liberal arts college of the church, where education in community is a primary focus.

The words of two senior students in chapel talks describe how they experienced their own transformations.

In a chapel homily titled, *Grab the Wire*, a senior chemistry/biology major recounted a 7th grade science project that took her to a cow pasture bordered with an electric fence. “I swiftly tapped the wire with my finger,” she said. “Feeling nothing, I grabbed the wire with both hands to step over it.” The difference between tapping lightly and grabbing onto something powerful was the point and was related to the woman in the Bible who, in a crowd, dared grab the garment of Jesus, desperately seeking a cure for her affliction. “Sometimes we only tap God like we tap a microphone,” she suggested. She sharpened her point by quoting Nelson Mandela. “Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.” To another audience she stressed the implications: “Here we [Luther students] change and are changed…we plan to heal this broken world….We see the humanity in our work where others see only slides in a microscope.” (Amanda Fenner, *The Mustard Seed*, April/May 2006, 8)

What does it mean to be human was the subject of another senior’s chapel talk. With an interdisciplinary major in Politics and Religion, this student had had an opportunity to spend a January term in South Africa. He reflected upon this transformative experience, telling his audience that he had “been raised in a society that praises the individuality and self-determining nature of human beings.” In one of his classes he had examined scholarly research regarding individual rights, independence, and self-sufficiency. But his South African experience had introduced him to a contrasting view of what it means to be human. “Ubuntu,” he explained, “conveys the idea that people are people through other people….my humanity is dependent upon your humanity.” He observed that this idea was influential in the relatively peaceful transition in South Africa from white minority rule to a black majority government. Using the first verses of John as his text, he concluded, “it is our interconnection, not individuality, which underlies our existence. …Our own liberation….is tied to the liberation of [others].” (Andrew Nelson, *Agora*, Spring 2003, 65)

These two examples of student work do not simply offer clever metaphors and interesting contrasts. Rather, they are examples of transformations that take place in community. What better preparation can there be for a life of service for the common good?