

Tyler Curtis
College of the Consistory
School of Philosophy
19° – Grand Pontiff
Topic 4

“Educators: The Grand Pontiffs of Success”

Located in the far northeast corner of the state of Kansas rests the small town of Atchison. More often than not, when a person thinks of Atchison, he probably remembers hearing about haunted houses, each filled with its own chilling ghost tale. As a local resident, I don't know if all of those stories are true or not, but there is another interesting feature about this small Midwest town: the Amelia Earhart Memorial Bridge. Built in 1937 and opened in 1938, the 2,571 foot long bridge overpasses the Missouri River, connecting the two historically rival states of Kansas and Missouri. When it was built, the then named MO-KAN Bridge was hailed as a masterpiece of engineering. Today, it has a special place among the nation's historical markers. Although the bridge is scheduled to be replaced in 2009 with a more modern (and safe) structure, for over 70 years people have traveled over this bridge by foot, motorcycle, car, and truck. I wonder if the builders realized how many people would travel over the bridge when they constructed it? Did they comprehend how much transportation would change over the course of time? I wonder if they could envision the parents and children crossing the bridge on their way to enjoy a holiday feast with family and friends? Could they see the trucks hauling grain and merchandise to be sold

in a global market? Whether they could see these visions or not, the “pontiffs” of the Amelia Earhart Bridge were truly “grand.” Surviving generations of use and abuse, their work is still being utilized today.

Each time I travel over the bridge, I am amazed by the structure’s durability and the genius of its builders. Even though I am not a structural engineer, I think there is a link between our two professions. As an educator, I am hopefully building bridges to success for others, the same bridges educators have built for me throughout my life. Unlike a structural engineer, the bridges educators build are not physical; rather, they are more ideological in nature. Educators build positive relationships with their students, and these relationships lead to learning through mentorship, instruction, and trust. Regardless of these differences, both structures assist people when crossing the seemingly impossible barriers encountered along life’s journey. In the 19°, Grand Pontiff, Scottish Rite Masons are taught to emulate the bridge builder, constantly forging new paths for the benefit of future generations. The lessons of the 19° directly apply to my manner of arriving in the field of education as well as to my goals as an professional educator.

Although I was not sure what career path I was going to take immediately after high school, it only took one semester of college to persuade me to become an educator. I credit most of this decision to three teachers I had at Seward County Community College: Lee Courtney, Ann Judd, and Dr. John Loucks. They inspired me to think for

myself; they challenged me to be critical of not only the thoughts and ideas of others but also my own way of thinking. For the first time in my life, I saw the powers of education and the benefits true learning can provide to its students. Since that time, I have been focused on preparing to teach youth and lead education towards fulfilling its mission to ensure that every student has a successful future.

After coming to the conclusion that education was the career choice for me, I had to decide upon what level and what subject to teach. I have always enjoyed being around young children, but could I actually teach them? I thought I would prefer interacting with these kids on the playground rather than teaching them in a classroom setting. Besides, I certainly did not want teaching to cloud my perception of the younger age group and become one of those nagging elementary teachers who is constantly complaining about “kids these days.” I settled on secondary education because I thought I could better relate to life in middle school and high school and have a positive impact on this age group. At times, I was lacking an adult mentor who understood me during my own teenage years, and I thought that maybe I could bridge this gap for some youth.

Since I chose secondary education, I had to narrow down a subject area to teach. My first choice was history and other social sciences. Some of my favorite classes had been history and government courses. Although I excelled in mathematics during most of my school years, my journey into the Calculus I and Calculus II classroom turned my

interests in math completely off, at least for the time being. Science wasn't a strong interest to me and I was hardly coordinated enough to be a physical education teacher. I enjoyed music, but I didn't want to make it my career, fearing that if teaching music was my "job" then my passion for music would diminish. As for the English language arts, I was always a decent writer, but I simply hated reading those boring novels assigned in English class. So, social studies it was.

Or so I thought. After two years at a junior college, I transferred to Emporia State University. When I met with my advisor in the social studies education department, he asked me if I planned to coach. I smiled and told him that I had not played organized sports since sixth grade. He recommended that I add a teaching field to my studies. According to him, the social studies market was saturated and most history teachers at the middle school and high school level were also coaches. If I wanted to obtain a job, he recommended being double qualified.

Since my goal was to obtain a college degree and become gainfully employed, I took my advisor's suggestion. Now I had to decide what field to add. I knew that science was out of the question and I was still dreading math after my Calculus II experience, so I decided to consider the English language arts. Ann Judd, my English instructor at SCCC, changed my opinion 'on those boring novels' from past English classes. Under her direction, I discovered literature that was far from boring. Much to the contrary, this material was fascinating, interesting, and even risqué at times.

Whatever we were reading in high school never captured my attention like the readings in these college classes. Thus, I added language arts to my degree program. In turn, this also added another year of school to my studies. I was having a pretty good time in college, so another year was not exactly a problem for me (although my parents who were paying for this experience didn't fully agree at first).

After three years at Emporia State University, I graduated with a bachelors degree in secondary education. I was certified to teach grades 7-12 social studies and language arts. My first teaching position took me to Topeka, KS, where I was hired to teach 8th and 10th grade language arts in the Seaman School District (I guess it was a good thing I added the language arts field to my degree). I traveled between a junior high school and the high school my first year. During my second year, I was teaching 7th, 8th, and 9th grade language arts and traveling between the two junior high schools. As my third year approached, a full time position at the high school opened up and I accepted it. During the next five years at the high school, I taught 10th and 11th grade language arts as well as senior composition. I taught some evening ACT preparatory classes and sponsored the student council as well as an annual student concert. During my time as a teacher, I had over 800 students in different classes and worked with dozens of different educators in the district. Truly, my time in the classroom afforded me numerous opportunities to build educational bridges.

When I first decided to become an educator, I knew I eventually wanted to work at the administrative level. Like I said before, I had always had a decent head for numbers (but certainly not for mathematical theory or the abstractness of Calculus) and even contemplated the idea of going into business before deciding on education. However, I wanted to make an impact on the future, and I didn't know what kind of business I could run that would make the kind of impact that education allows. Since educational administration blends the managerial tasks of the business world and the idealism of education, it was immediately appealing.

Now, I work as a building administrator for a school that serves a rather unique population of youth. My student population consists of adjudicated juvenile offenders who reside at a state facility, and my school supplies the educational services to these youth. This position has proven to be a challenging one. All teenagers are naturally defiant and rebellious, but our population has defied the laws of society in such a manner that they have to be removed from their homes to receive special services which will hopefully change their destructive behaviors. There is no doubt about it, this student population can be quite demanding at times.

Reflecting on my career up to this point, I begin to see how the lessons of the 19^o can be directly applied to my profession. I remember all of the students I have had in classes. Did I give each one of them enough attention? Did I teach them something helpful? What do they remember about my class? What do they remember about me

(yikes!)? Will they relay that information to others? When a person starts to think about the monumental impact that a single teacher has on the lives of others, it astounds you. Although a secondary teacher may only come into direct contact with, say, 3000 students over the course of a teaching career, that teacher's impact is far wider. His students will go on to pass the information he taught to others, and they to others, and so on into perpetuity.

In many ways, the same kind of questions, concerns, and impacts on the future is true for a bridge builder. After a bridge project is completed, how many people travel over that bridge? Were all the components installed correctly? Did each bolt get tightened enough? Are the welds going to stand the test of time? Again, like an educator, the bridge builder leaves his subject once the project is complete, but the impact of that bridge lives on well after him. Generations of people will travel over the bridge, and those people trust that the bridge is safe and reliable. In the same way, parents and guardians trust teachers and school officials to be competent educators who maintain safe, effective practices. Indeed, the bridges built in our schools unite the lives of generations to come.

What Pike describes as the mission of a Mason in *Morals and Dogma* is exactly the same as the mission of a teacher, "to sow, that others may reap; to work and plant for those who are to occupy the earth when we are dead; to project our influences far into the future, and live beyond our time..." (317). This is why builders build, why teachers

teach, why parents raise children, and why God put humans on earth. What more noble work can we do than that which profits future generations?

As noble as Pike's words and ideas are, we know that they are not always displayed. I look around my school and ponder why my students have committed their crimes. From chronic truancy and petty theft to sexual offences and violent outbursts, the students have committed atrocious offenses. Is that just the way they are? Are some people born to be bad? Is there any hope that these young men will change their ways and become positive contributors to society?

When I think about what caused my current students to be here, I can't help but acknowledge that they are a product of their environment, an environment devoid of bridges to success. Somewhere along the way, someone dropped the ball when it came to mentoring proper morals and virtues to these youth. Somehow, they learned to behave in the way they have behaved in the past. I can't look into the eyes of a newborn baby and think he is born evil. Although science has shown that much is learned between the time of conception and birth, a child learns so much more after he is born.

Despite their rocky starts in life, I along with my teachers and the rest of our facility's staff have the opportunity to truly help build bridges to success for these youth. We have the ability, and the *responsibility*, to give these young men a way to cross over the troubled waters of their past. By providing them with an education and

programming necessary for their success, we bridge the gaps between the past and future for each young man.

Most of the students who attend my school will return to their respective homes after their time here, and I will probably never see them again. However, their time here is not forgotten or lost if we have provided a life-changing experience for these young men. In the words of Albert Pike, "he who does good...is like him who loans money, that he may, after certain months, receive it back with interest." In our case, we may not directly receive the "interest" back on our investment into the lives of these residents, but we trust that the greater society will reap the benefits of our work. We hope we have the ability to intervene and stop a negative cycle and start a new, more positive cycle for their future.

The admonition that "mankind, in its essential unity, constitutes an eternal present beyond time and space" is not only a theme for the 19th but also a theme for my life. This admonition relates a core idea that all humans must work together today to ensure the progress and successes of tomorrow. By taking the lessons of the great teachers of the past and applying them to the present, we secure a promising future. Yesterday's MO-KAN Bridge and today's Amelia Earhart Memorial Bridge continues to join two rival states. The structure serves as a symbol that despite differences of opinion, we must work together to ensure mutual success. None of us live in complete isolation; we live with the actions, decisions, and policies of our present fellow man as

well as with the work and memories of our predecessors. We all have people in our past who have assisted us in building the bridge to our success. For me, I have been blessed to have loving parents, supportive friends, and committed teachers to guide and direct my life, forging bridges leading to personal, social, and spiritual advancement. As a father, a husband, an educator, and a Mason, it is my duty and privilege to serve others in the same manner. As Grand Pontiffs, it is our mission to assist others along their life journey. In this manner, we provide immortal services and build bridges for future generations.

Works Reviewed

Baughn, James. "Amelia Earhart Bridge." *Historic Bridges of the United States*. 2008.

James Baughn and Contributors. 9 January 2009

<<http://bridgehunter.com/ks/atchison/amelia-earhart/>>.

Clausen, Henry. *Clausen's Commentary on Morals and Dogma*. San Diego: Neyenesch, 1985.

De Hoyos, Arturo. *Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor and Guide*. Washington, DC: Supreme Council, 33°, Southern Jurisdiction, 2007.

Hutchens, Rex R. *A Bridge to Light*. Williamston, S.C.: Electric City, 1995.

Pike, Albert. *Morals and Dogma*. Richmond: J.H. Jenkins, 1945.