

## “Walkabout” – The Regis Neighborhood and Metro Denver

### Ideas For Freshman Orientation and Orienteering

By

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At one point in this year’s “Orientation Weekend,” new freshmen at Regis will accompany their freshman writing seminar instructor on a walk through parts of the neighborhood around Regis. The immediate purpose of the walk is to give new students some sense of the Denver neighborhood where Regis is situated and also to provide some experience and ideas for a first writing assignment on the question “What is My Community?” (Don’t worry, your professor will provide you with plenty of explanation of that first assignment.)

The purpose of this short essay, which you’re asked to read before you come to Regis, is simply to suggest some of the reasons why Regis wants you, as a new university student, to get to know Denver and to think about the role of community and city in your college education. I’ve used the Australian Aboriginal term “Walkabout” and the backpacking term “orienteering” in my title as ways to suggest some of those reasons. As you probably know, “orienteering” is a term for learning how to find your way in new terrain. You may also know that the Aboriginal people of Australia use the term “walkabout” to describe their practice of taking a free or unmapped journey in order to open mind and spirit to deeper, more soul-shaping and life-directing truths.

Your brief neighborhood walk during Orientation has, in other words, both practical and symbolic purposes. It will be the start of your practical “orienteeing” to the Regis neighborhood and to Metro-Denver. (This will hopefully be true even for those of you from the Denver area.) Yet it also has a symbolic purpose since it is our way of suggesting to you that your college years should be an intellectual and spiritual “walkabout,” a journey that cannot be limited to the college campus, but must include the wider horizons of the entire human city.

You may know that this idea – about college engagement with the larger city – represents a significant and fairly recent shift in the way many colleges and universities in the US think about higher education. Schools run by monasteries were one of the earliest forms of “higher education” in medieval Europe. Thus they tended to be located in rural places. That sense of the countryside as an ideal place for learning was also true for the earliest colleges and universities in this country. Yale, Princeton, and Harvard were all built within travelling distance to New York and Boston, but not so close that students would be “distracted” by the busyness and temptations of urban life. Today there are still quite a few colleges and universities throughout the US that have rural locations.

It is, of course, true that many of the great medieval universities, such as the University of Paris, were deliberately located in major cities. It’s also true that cities have grown up around other colleges and universities. Yet even in such “city universities” there has typically been some separation and often significant tension between “town and gown” – between the university with its academic and youthful culture (and usually its own set of

laws) and the city with its quite different social and economic purposes, and with different laws and cultural expectations. Said differently, while the norms of family life and business and political governance dominated the life of the city, a more intellectually open and freer culture characterized the colleges and universities.

Yet universities began to change radically in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the “German model” of the research university began to spread throughout the West (and is now spreading throughout the world). The primary focus of the university was no longer liberal or liberating education for the minds of the young, but the discovery of new knowledge and new technologies by increasingly specialized research. Students then became specialists-in-training, although the universities, especially in the US, continued to provide liberal studies as forms of moral development for these future specialists and technicians. The university’s relationship to the cities also changed – from separation to greater cooperation, especially economic cooperation. The universities increasingly depended upon cities and governments to fund their research through business and government contracts, often military contracts. The cities, in turn, depended upon the work of university specialists for the studies and discoveries which led to economic development, urban growth, and national expansion.

Of course such specialized research was never the *primary* goal of smaller liberal arts colleges like Regis. At such colleges, often church-related (whether Protestant or Catholic), the primary goal still remained the liberation and development of mind and spirit. Yet it is also true that such liberal arts colleges were needed, and were funded,

because they prepared the technically or professionally trained workforce for the modern city. Thus American Catholic schools like Regis grew, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and especially after World War II, because they trained the sons and grandsons (and eventually the granddaughters) of Catholic immigrants to this country. For Regis, it was then mostly the children of Irish, German, Italian and Polish immigrants who settled in cities like Chicago and St. Louis and San Francisco – and, of course, in the Italian and Irish neighborhoods of northwest Denver where Regis was located.

More recently, of course, Regis draws students from a much wider population base – women as much as men, and not just Catholics, but Protestants, Jews, some Muslims, and many with no particular religious background. Students come to Regis typically in the hope that they will receive a good, strong Jesuit education – which means good professional training (for business or law, teaching or the health professions, government or social service) and good preparation for graduate and professional schools. Yet the Jesuit tradition also means a liberating education which opens and deepens intellectual and spiritual horizons. Of course, students also come to have fun and to grow socially in a popular city like Denver and in the nearby mountains.

Tensions between “town and gown” have continued even at colleges like Regis. There is, for instance, the true story about the evening in the 1930s, back when the Ku Klux Klan was a powerful force in Denver (as much anti-immigrant as anti-Negro). In response to a rumored Klan raid on the campus, the student body (then all male) stood around the boundaries of Regis, armed with baseball bats and other instruments of street warfare,

prepared to defend the college. Perhaps as a result, the raid never happened. These days the more typical tensions arise from an occasional off-campus student party that is too noisy, or from the fear in some students' minds that the neighborhood and other parts of the city are places of danger and crime.

More recently, to come to the point of this short history – *and* to the symbolic point of the Orientation “walkabout” – the neighborhood and the city are no longer seen by the faculty and by most students as places from which the college campus is separated. Rather they are increasingly seen as an integral dimension of a university education. Students learn not only *for* future life in the city, but *by* present involvement in the life of the city. Obviously that is true for students in programs like teacher-education or nursing which demand on-site training in classrooms or hospitals, just as it is also true for business and pre-professional programs which either require or strongly recommend various forms of on-the-job internships. Yet it is also true (perhaps even more true) for the core or liberal studies undertaken by *all* students at Regis. Said differently, involvement in the human city is crucial for the opening of horizons, the widening of experience, the challenge of thinking critically about major human concerns, and the development of character and spirit which are the goals of a truly liberal education. The university and the city are partners or collaborators in such an education. Together they help each student become more fully attuned to their own personal sense of freedom and responsibility, and to the role they feel called to play in the human community.

At Regis we speak about such engagement in our community as developing “leaders in service to others,” especially to those members of our human family who are most in need. Thus many courses and programs involve “service learning” – where students give service to others in our neighborhood or in the wider city, but where they typically receive more than they give because they grow in their understanding of the real world and in their relationships to different kinds of people. A number of our athletic programs, for instance, require that student athletes be involved in such community service. Regis students tutor at local schools and work at soup-kitchens and drop-in centers for the homeless. Accounting students help with tax returns and nursing students with community health fairs. Some education programs involve long-term relations with immigrant families where the Regis students help children with their schoolwork. In return they receive language tutoring and, more significantly, they receive the gift of growing in their ability to embrace people of different cultures. A growing number of students also take learning and service trips to other countries during spring or summer holidays.

Of course, such community-based learning is always a bit of a stretch, for faculty as much as students. Indeed there are many obstacles to this newer emphasis on integrating university learning with the life of the city. The automobile itself may be the major obstacle – since we are all increasingly in the habit of speeding past or through most of the human city as we make our way to some pre-set location. That’s part of the symbolism of *walking* through our neighborhood during Orientation. An opening of mind and spirit often occurs when we slow down and are not so controlled by fixed

destinations. Of course, the automobile facilitates the fast paced and typically fixed patterns of student life – the pattern of work, on campus or at a job, and then play, at all the typical youth venues like parties, concerts, coffee-shops and other watering holes. Set in such fixed patterns, we're both on campus and in the city, but often with too little deeper human learning in either place.

Increasingly, of course, electronic communications rival and may have overtaken the automobile as the major obstacle to liberal learning in the human city. To be sure, as with the automobile, media such as the TV, the net, and the cell or iPhone can and at times do give us greater connection to the wider city and world. Yet it often seems that they more typically narrow and limit such connection – to just the list of friends on phone or Facebook, or just to the currently “in” fashions on TV or YouTube. Thus we can surf the familiar and ignore the world, chat with friends while we speed past neighbors. The pace and pressures of classes, assignments, and jobs can make such narrowing of our world seem almost unavoidable for students. Nor are we professors necessarily any different. Indeed, in the name of good courses and academic excellence we can push our students to exactly such narrowing and ignoring – to various forms of specialized and learned ignorance.

The constant challenge for all of us, then, for both students and professors, is to make our education more real, more open to the fuller reality of human life. That, of course, means making education practical in a variety of ways. But mere practicality can itself be a form of narrowness and ignorance. A truly liberating education must be real in a fuller

and deeper sense. It must involve not just the practice or practicality of specific skills and professions, but significant engagement with the wider world of our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in the human city, and with the wider world of our natural environment.

As a new student at Regis, it is important for you to know that this “new” emphasis on integrating university education with the wider life of the city is actually not all that new for Jesuit schools. Ignatius Loyola was the founder of the Society of Jesus – the official English name for the Jesuits. The Jesuits themselves often refer to their society as “the company,” a group of companions. Though a Spaniard, Ignatius met the companions who eventually joined him while they were all students at the University of Paris in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century. These men came to share a vision of being that “company” – companions for each other and with Jesus. In addition to their studies, they did various forms of what we’d today call “social work” while in Paris. Their original idea was eventually to become missionaries to foreign lands, an idea that is still taken up by Jesuits throughout the world. Quite soon, however, this company of friends was asked to start colleges in various cities throughout Europe in order to educate young men for the turbulent and exciting times of the Renaissance and Reformation. John Francis Regis, the Frenchman after whom Regis University is named, taught at such a school in the French city of Le Puy. Like many of his fellow Jesuits, he was not only a teacher, but was involved with the life of his city, especially with pressing human needs. The bronze statue of him over the main entrance to the campus Student Center shows him surrounded by women with their children. They are women who had been pushed into poverty by

war and changing economic conditions, and then forced into prostitution to provide for themselves and their children. With help from others, but also in the face of significant opposition by those who benefitted from the prostitution, John Francis Regis worked to provide alternative and more humanizing forms of work for these women – so that they could support themselves and their families.

Thus it is that Jesuit colleges and universities have typically been located in urban centers. Today there are Jesuit colleges and universities in Tokyo, in Manila, in San Salvador, in London, in Mexico City, in Lima, and in hundreds of other cities across the globe. In the US there are twenty-seven Jesuit colleges and universities located in such cities as San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, New Orleans, Cincinnati...and Denver. Their mission remains much the same – to prepare people for lives of engagement and service in the human city, to prepare them professionally but also humanly, with liberated minds and engaged spirits. The new emphasis on relating the university and the city is, then, an old emphasis at Jesuit schools.

Thus, as we welcome you to Regis, we extend a three-fold invitation. Actually it's really just three forms of one invitation – the invitation symbolized by your Orientation “walkabout.” First, we invite you to get involved in our neighborhood and our city – as a place of play and of learning, of service and of new relationships, of entertainment and art; as a place for the kinds of growth in mind and spirit whereby you will gradually find your orientation, your way or calling in life. Second, we invite you to use your college years as a time to learn more about the major issues confronting the human city – issues

of wealth and poverty, gender and race, immigration and globalization, waste or sustainability; issues about education and art, about the need for beauty and the pervasiveness of vulgarity, about health care and childcare, about homelessness and gentrification. And third, we invite you to use your college years to so open and deepen your mind and spirit that you grow more fully into your own personal ways of responding to such issues and needs.

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