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Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto Brings Agency to Aspirational Instruction

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Book Review: *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* brings agency to aspirational instruction

By Jodi McFarland Friedman

The warning is not new: Higher education is at a precipice. Says the right: snowflake students melt before contrary, often conservative views, while colleges coddle them. The left rallies around the idea of making at least associates degrees free, opening college to more than just those who can pay for it. The implication: higher education as a business has run aground. The student body shoulders more of the cost as public funding declines. The business model, the money and the middle class are awash in uncomfortable, inevitable questions. Families eye the rocketing price tag and ask, is it even worth it?

Enter Kevin M. Gannon, a history professor at Des Moines, Iowa’s Grand View College. Is college worth it? When done right, his answer — to paraphrase Walt Whitman — is a resounding “yes” over the roofs of the world. In *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, Gannon asserts that an educator’s best defense against backlash, handwringing, and abandonment is faith in the craft, the will to make it better, and the guts to seize this moment. He’s talking to everyone who has a hand in teaching — from adjunct professor peddlers carrying courses in their packs from school to school to professors with full tenure, private offices, and landlines. His audience is well chosen: who better to make education work than those on the inside? Because itinerant instructors lack power, he asks those with authority and job security to accept more of the transformative teaching risk. Teaching well is not accidental, even as pedagogy lands a distant second in graduate schools. Gannon’s declaration is woven through with anecdote, example, and exhortation.

Radical Hope (West Virginia University Press) arrived as COVID-19 quarantines socked colleges in the eye. Spring break was like the Rapture; the student body left, its avatar a tepid replacement. At 166 pages, Gannon’s slender treatise is not a heavy lift for instructors even at mid-semester, and its language is accessible. The book doesn’t hit coronavirus head-on, but coronavirus is a crisis, and *Radical Hope* is a crisis manual for transformative teaching that applies easily to virtual instruction. Universal Design for Learning adjustments shouldn’t be an afterthought; in actuality, they serve all students, not simply those who have documented accommodations. He encourages faculty to scrutinize their syllabi and build out documents and courses that construct rather than raze students’ partnerships in their own education.

Gannon lays bare his own undergraduate struggle to transform himself from unreliable student to unrepentant scholar. He’s been on the receiving end of the syllabus that reads like *Crime and Punishment* — points docked for this or that, penny-ante grading that penalizes creative leaps (with sometimes sloppy landings.) Does your syllabus ask for the paper trail of grandma’s funeral? We tell our students that our door is open; our syllabi meantime shout that our minds are closed, and our students are the presumed enemies of their own success. Gannon squints at classes known to weed out students from the major: does “academic hazing” prize survival over new synapses?

We talk about the value of diversity, yet Gannon was dismayed to see his own assigned readings leaned entirely on the white male canon. Yet he also cautions against “shallow

performative wokeness.” From infancy, humans show their smarts; they note what we do more than what we say.

Gannon’s manifesto is grounded in theory. The stark chapter “Classrooms of Death” explores how Danish philosopher N.F.S. Grundtveig classified elite learning as bereft of transformative power. He pushed his society toward inclusive and accessible classrooms for the masses. Gannon explores Brazilian Paulo Freire’s critique of the “banking concept” of teaching — the scholar deposits knowledge in the student, who withdraws it for the exam — as a bankruptcy of true learning. Each chapter ends with “Into Practice,” a practical guide to bringing life to his major points in the lecture hall and the lab. It complements translational family science, where the study of close interpersonal relationships reaches the applied level, where research becomes tangible (Darling et al., 2017). Gannon guides a critical examination of each reader’s teaching praxis, that space between lofty ideals and lecture hall. How we lead there can affirm or belie our aspirations. *Radical Hope* is a translational treatise.

“The general public is souring on higher education,” Gannon writes. The aphorism that college is an investment in the future is giving way to interrogatives about value proposition and earnings potential. Colleges themselves are to blame for this transactional view. Yet Gannon says now is the time for educators to shrug off the temptation toward cynicism and invigorate their practices. *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* is a game plan.

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