Educating Contentment
Kevin Johnson, director of spiritual formation and campus pastor, shares his thoughts on consumerism and finding contentment in higher education.

Psalm 23 is, quite possibly, one of the most well-known chapters of the Bible. It would be quite the task to try and count the number of times this poem has been printed. There is something about David’s words in this poem that resonate with the longings of the human heart.

Psalm 23 has been described as a picture of what it looks like when a human life is caught up in the ‘God-life.’ It paints an image of a soul that has anchored itself in God.

The poem begins with these familiar words: ‘The LORD is my shepherd.’ The psalmist defines the relationship. The LORD is the shepherd. He is the guide. He is the leader.

Then the poet makes a fascinating statement: ‘The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.’

Some Bible translations express this phrase as ‘The LORD is my shepherd.’ Not stating that everything he could ever desire has been given to him. Rather, this is a statement about satisfaction. According to this poet, a primary characteristic of those who live the ‘God-life’ is that they have learned the art of contentment.

And that is the rub. Especially for those in Christian higher education. We live in a culture that excels in discontentment. The ability to create dissatisfaction is an oil that lubricates much of the economic and social machinery of North American culture.

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This is the truth of the matter: Discontentment is very a powerful fuel. It drives human behavior more than we dare to admit or realize.

4. See Paul’s comments in Philippians 4:10-20 for further reflection on this issue.
Q&A with Pastor KJ

Why did you choose to write about the topic, “Educating Contentment?”

I have been deeply impacted by Socrates’ and Aristotle’s vision of education as being primarily about “character transformation” rather than “information transfer.” Learning contentment seems to be an important element of an “educational curriculum” that encourages transformation. This vision of education seems to be fading in the face of current cultural realities.

It seems that so much of life in North America is driven by consumerism, even church and education. If this is the case, then one of the critical skills that needs to be learned in order to live wisely is the skill of contentment. This is the task of spiritual formation. “It is a possibility that an active critique of consumer culture is not a primary agenda on our radar screen.”

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Why do you feel it is important to address consumerism on Christian campuses?

Consumerism is a very powerful fuel. The college years are a critical period of time when consumerism can be evaluated, challenged and other options considered. The Christian tradition provides a very important critique of consumerism. Thus, it should be a natural part of the dialogue on a Christian campus. If a Christian college is honestly trying to develop students, staff and faculty that can impact our current cultural realities for Christ, then wresting with consumerism is a key element in such an endeavor.

Did writing this article change your attitudes about consumerism? Why or why not?

By growing up in this society I have had a “consumer” exists in me. This article is a part of my journey away from being a consumer – small steps. But I sense there is some helpful movement in this regard. I am reminded of Eugene Peterson’s description of the process of Christian maturation “as a long obedience/journey in a particular direction.” It is critical that we become the kind of community which naturally transforms character. If we desire to shape “wanters” we need to walk with students on a guided journey. This takes a commitment that goes beyond providing classes, chapels and programs. We need to have long conversations about life and purpose with each other. We need to share unhurried meals together. We need to go for walks. We need to have the courage to look each other in the eye and ask, “What’s the state of your soul these days?”

We need to laugh together. We need to listen closely to what we are saying about us and the kind of people that we need to think wisely about the kind of people we are producing. All this involves us doing life intentionally together in biblical community. We have only begun to talk about what character formation could possibly involve at Tabor. Everything seems to be in the embryonic phase.

Where do you think Tabor falls in the area of contentment vs. dissatisfaction?

There is always someone discontent about something. It is a possibility that an active critique of consumer culture is not a primary agenda on our radar screen. There are some pockets that are talking about what Christian faithfulness in our modern culture might look like. These kinds of discussions will benefit many folks as they enter the macro level of our community.

Do you have any ideas for Tabor regarding consumerism?

It is very typical of our culture to try to address issues of character formation by creating a program or bringing in a speaker. This seldom seems to work, at least for the long haul. I think it goes back to the reality that spiritual formation is “a long obedience/journey in a particular direction.”

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But the psalmist speaks of another way of life—a life that is dominated by contentment. He is “not in want!” He is thrilled at the “lack of unmet needs” in his life. He does not need a faster computer or a new hair color. What he needs, he has. The shepherd of his soul has offered him the privilege of a satisfied existence.

Psalm 23:1 seems like a pipe dream. Contentment might be one of the most elusive realities of modern day living. Yet I am beginning to wonder if this is one of the significant issues that Christian education must address these days. Could it be one of the greatest challenges a Christian institution faces? Is the challenge of helping students learn the art of contentment?

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Dallas Willard notes that, for most of us, our “wanters” are broken. They need fixing.

We want the wrong things and we often are unaware of this. C.S. Lewis argued that human beings are creatures who are too easily satisfied by trivial things like sex, money, fame, and material possessions. Lewis noted that this satisfaction does not last for very long. In fact, it breeds more dissatisfaction. Our “wanters” are broken. A significant part of Christian spiritual formation is the transformation of our “wanters.”

This kind of transformation is a great need on our campuses today.

Contentment is, at its heart, a character issue. The fact of the matter is that it is a long and hard journey to come to a place where a person can say “Yes, it is true, I have all that I need.” Maybe one of the best gifts we can offer our students is some guided help in thinking through their desires and appetites.

We serve a God who is able to satisfy us down to the deepest recesses of the human heart. We have the opportunity to invite students to experience this contentment. This is a sacred privilege.

Please pray for wisdom in engaging this challenge.

Kevin Johnson

-- Malinda Just

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