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Educational Experiences, The Evolving Role of Technology, and the Vision of Louise Cowan: An Interview with Father Thomas Esposito, O. Cist.

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Interview with Fr. Thomas (Bryan Esposito) at 11am on November 30, 2016 at the University of Dallas.

The guiding questions were as follows:

Where are you from? Is this where your parents were from originally?

What is your earliest memory of being in school?

What sort of extracurricular activities were there and what did you participate in?

Who is one fellow student that you remember?

How do you think your schooling compares to the experience of students right now?

What changes would you have made in your own education, or the education of students today?

What importance do you think travel has in terms of education?

What other questions would you add to this list? Can you recollect other important educational experiences, positive or negative?

Transcript:

1 **Emily Buckner:** It is November 30, 2016, and I am here at the University of Dallas with Fr.
2 Thomas.

3 **Fr. Thomas:** We are live in my office, Braniff 222—1845 E Northgate Drive, Irving TX.

4 **EB:** Aahm, So, Fr. Thomas, where are you from?

5 **FT:** Well, Ms. Emily, I was born in Oakland, California...you didn't know that did you?

6 **EB:** No.

7 **FT:** But I was raised from the age of 4 or so in Omaha, Nebraska. So Nebraska is home.

8 **EB:** So your parents are from California originally?

9 **FT:** No, they were East Coast folk, actually, um. They were both born in Pennsylvania actually.
10 But my mom grew up in Philadelphia, Missouri for a time—Florissant? Just outside of St. Louis.

11 **EB:** Oh—that's near where I live.

12 **FT:** And then, ah, Bloomington Delaware. My dad was born and raised in Punxsutawney,
13 Pennsylvania. And they met at a hospital outside of Philadelphia. And my dad was in the Navy.
14 So when he was stationed in California I came along, as did my sister.

15 **EB:** So you were in school mainly in Omaha?

16 **FT:** Entirely in Omaha, yeah, up until college.

17 **EB:** What's your earliest memory of going to school, I guess youngest?

18 **FT:** I do have memories of my preschool experience. For some reason my parents put me in a
19 Jewish preschool. It was down the street from our house—convenient, I guess? So I remember a
20 handful of prayers that we were taught—(sings) Shalom Chaverim, Shalom Chaverim. I
21 remember playing with dreidels in the classroom. I remember having a lot of fun in there, um. In
22 grade school—so I did go to a Catholic grade school, St. Wenceslas—I have distinct memories
23 of Kindergarten, learning the alphabet by means of the alphabet people. I don't know if you're
24 familiar with that?

25 **EB:** What's that?

26 **FT:** Each letter has a person and corresponding, ah, name attached to it. So Ms. A was always
27 sneezy, a-choo. B, Mr. B, was beautiful buttons. C was cotton candy, and so on. So I clearly
28 remember all of these things.

29 **EB:** I never heard of that.

30 **FT:** And my, I remember all my teachers' names. The best one was the assistant in Kindergarten
31 class. We called her Mrs. T, because her full last name was Tramantozie.

32 **EB:** Whoa; why was she the best?

1 FT: Because during lunch everyone wanted her to come to their table. And if you brought a
2 banana, as ah, as food, she would use it as a phone to call President Busch—or I guess it was
3 President Reagan at that, at that time. And she would chat with him about, you know, how to be
4 a good president, why these children are misbehaving. She was just delightful to be around.
5 Yeah, Mrs. T.

6 EB: Can you describe, like, any of the, the other kids in school, or just give a sense of...just the
7 children?

8 FT: Early on, in grade school—elementary school? I remember playing on the playground. So I
9 was a sports nut, always had a ball in my hands. And so there was a group of friends...we were,
10 we were the athletes. And so we would play all sorts of sports. I think the best one was a creative
11 game called “kill the man with the ball.” That was, that was outlawed pretty quick, ah, after
12 some unfortunate injuries. Ahm, but in the classroom, I remember, ah, sitting at desks, doing
13 math problems...um. In second grade one of the fun events at the beginning of every math class
14 was the mad minute.

15 EB: Oh, we used to do that.

16 FT: You were given a sheet of like 60 basic multiplication or division problems. You turned it
17 over, did as many as you could in 60 seconds. I was usually close to the top, so I had a
18 competition with Jeff Deharty. He was ah, he was the one I had to scope out, see if he was really
19 up on his numbers...um. It was a co-ed school. So, ah, I remember—well, already in preschool,
20 at the Jewish community center, I proposed marriage to Chrissy Fleisner. And my best friend in
21 kindergarten, um, after Chrissy and I, you know, broke up, was, uh, Trisha Harm. I invited her
22 over to my house once after school, and, uh, I think she ended up going home early because I
23 didn't want to play with her, I just wanted to read the sports page when the newspaper came, and
24 she was kinda left by herself. Ah, my mom wasn't too happy with me after, after that, for
25 obvious reasons, um.

26 EB: Did you do any organized sports, like, extracurricular things?

27 FT: So the school had a soccer team. I remember playing soccer. I still have my, ah, first jersey,
28 actually. Yeah, um, I can even still fit into it, but it, it might burst a seam or two.

29 EB: What grade was this from?

30 FT: This is Kindergarten.

31 EB: Oh my gosh.

32 FT: And we had, and I had little patches to signify the years that I played soccer. Um, still have a
33 bunch of trophies—well, they're at my parents' house, but ah. So there's soccer. I played tee-ball
34 through the YMCA. And they were all St. Wenceslas kids on the team, so that was, that was fun,
35 for sure.

36 EB: So you knew everybody?

37 FT: Yeah. So, yeah, lots of sports, basketball as well, I think through the YMCA.

38 EB: Do you think your grade school experience is different than what goes on now, today? How
39 do you think it's changed?

40 FT: That's a great question. Um, well the technology has certainly changed, um. We had cassette
41 tapes that would play music, and that's how we learned the alphabet people songs, um. (Sings)
42 Beautiful buttons, beautiful buttons, la-da-da-da-da. So, and we learned all that from cassette
43 tapes. We didn't have...we may have had overhead projectors by the time I was in fourth or fifth
44 grade, but um. We had computer cla—computer lessons in middle school, 6th, 7th, 8th grade. I
45 remember going down to the computer lab and working with MS Dos.

46 EB: What's that?

1 FT: It's basically just a text, um...there, there was no windows wasn't around just yet. There
2 were very basic computer games. Paperboy was one. Jeopardy was a lot of fun. But it was very
3 simple stuff. And while I learned to type fairly quickly, there was no, um...it was still a very
4 primitive computer experience, compared to what we have now. So the emphasis wasn't on
5 technology, as a need to, to learn nearly as much as it is now.

6 EB: What about high school, jumping forward—where did you go to high school, and how do
7 you think your experience compares to...?

8 FT: Well I, I went to a Jesuit high school, Creighton prep, in Omaha. There the technology was a
9 little more in place—so, from overhead projectors, an occasional, uh, movie shown in class. But
10 I would imagine that the experience is largely the same today, at least at prep, with regard to
11 when I was there. And that's only been 20-some years. Gosh, I'm so old Emily. I'm getting
12 old—not quite 20 years. So the, the, the teacher-student experience is still the same. There was a
13 greater emphasis on getting to know your teacher outside of the classroom, it wasn't simply a
14 'well, they're the master, they know everything'. I remember dialogue being an important part of
15 the experience, um. We had quite a few field trips at prep and at St. Wenceslas to different places
16 in Omaha. And those were very valuable, and I think that still goes on today.

17 EB: What about curriculum-wise? What sort of curriculum did you guys have in high school?

18 FT: So in high school religion was required every, maybe every semester? At least one, one
19 course a year, um. And there was a set, set curriculum for that. But I was in the, in the honors AP
20 track, at least junior and senior year. So it was more of a, it was a smaller group than the, than
21 the whole. We got to know each other really well on account of that. But it was pretty
22 comprehensive—your, your English, your sciences, math, religion, geography. And it was, it was
23 fairly demanding prep stuff. I mean it's not an elite, snobby, preppy boys' school, but it's, it does
24 require a lot of homework and effort.

25 EB: So that was, that was private school. I'm just wondering what the public school system was
26 like. Did you have any friends who went to public school?

27 FT: I did, yeah, so a bunch of, um, St. Wenceslas grads went to the nearby public high school,
28 Millard North. They were Prep's rivals in, ah, football, for sure.

29 EB: Who was better?

30 FT: Prep! Of course! So we won, we won the state championship my junior year, and lost—

31 EB: Did you play?

32 FT: I didn't play, no, um. I kinda regret never trying football, but. And we, we were runner up
33 my senior year. It was a crushing overtime loss in the state championship game...but, yeah.

34 EB: Not bitter?

35 FT: No, no—the, the better team won, I think, but we were, we were that close, that close. At any
36 rate, Millard North had a certain stereotype attached to it. It was a place where you didn't really
37 have to work and if you wanted to cut class and smoke weed you could. Um, but of course that
38 was the, the biased view from a prep kid who felt that he was swamped with homework every
39 night and, uh, had to juggle a lot of things. I think the reality was not quite so drastic. But there
40 was a general sense that Prep was more, more difficult and that the public schools were looked
41 down upon from our vantage point.

42 EB: Coming at it as a teacher now, how would you change how things were taught in high
43 school? Or anything about your high school experience?

44 FT: Hm, what would I change? Well I would definitely change material in the theology
45 curriculum at prep, but that, that's kind of another...so for experiences in prayer class senior year
46 we did not read a single Christian author. And, speaking of movies, in the school chapel right in

1 front of the tabernacle we watched, uh, Good Will Hunting. Which if you've ever seen that
2 movie has about 100 or more F-bombs.

3 EB: That's a little hokey.

4 FT: That was, that was awkward, to be sure. In fact my AP US History teacher once quipped, "I
5 could be a great religion teacher here at Prep, because I'm really good at pressing play". So lots
6 of movies in other words, um, and perhaps a little short on content, theological depth. But in
7 terms of other aspects of the education, um, I personally wish I'd been more attuned to the
8 intellectual life in high school. I was—at least up until senior year—just kind of a sports and girls
9 minded dude, who, ah, got through his classes, was interested generically in the material, but I
10 didn't have the, the fiery passion for the core curriculum that I, that I discovered at UD. Um, but
11 in terms of things I would change, I was very grateful to go to an all guys school. I really believe
12 that there is a great advantage in separating boys and girls, especially in high school. So I don't
13 think I would, I would change too much, honestly, about the experience.

14 EB: What about higher education, jumping forward again. Where did you go to college, and...?

15 FT: I attended the University of Dallas.

16 EB: Oh! That's right.

17 FT: From 2001 to 2005

18 EB: Oh, you did cross country! Right?

19 FT: Yes, I did, I did cross country, that's right. Track one year, but that was a waste of time.
20 Cross country, uh, sophomore, junior, and senior years.

21 EB: Hm. Has the core changed at all since you were here?

22 FT: It has. It has.

23 EB: How so?

24 FT: Theology went down from three core courses to two. Philosophy went from four to three.
25 Ah, some of the Lit Trad books have changed.

26 EB: Which ones?

27 FT: So when I did, Lit Trad II? We did a book called Omeros by Derek Walcott. It was totally
28 incomprehensible to me. Ah, I had no idea what was going on in that book. Um, I forget what
29 it's been replaced with now, in Lit Trad II. Or maybe it was Lit Trad I—so the epics.

30 EB: Oh, the Iliad, and Odyssey, and Aeneid. There's another one. Oh, and Sir Gawain, and...

31 FT: Boewulf.

32 EB: Boewulf.

33 FT: Is Boewulf still taught?

34 EB: Mmm-hmm. Yeah.

35 FT: Okay. I forget where Omeros went in. But in, ah, Lit Trad VI we did Madame Bovary,
36 which is no longer taught. And...I think that's been replaced with a poetry...

37 EB: Mansfield Park.

38 FT: Mansfield Park and a poetry unit of some sort, which we didn't really have. So there've been
39 a few cosmetic changes like that in the English core. But there, there was a huge controversy
40 about changes to the core. I think I was a brother in the abbey at the time, so I didn't get a full
41 sense of it, certainly not as a faculty member. But there was a lot of wrangling about that. As it is
42 though, the core still has the vision of Louise Cowan guiding it. It's substantially the same.

43 EB: Hm. would you add any other questions, or just comments?

44 FT: About education? I think the...the huge factor that you would notice in comparing
45 generations is the technology. I mean, there are some high schools, I think in Omaha, but

1 certainly here in Dallas, that give their students laptop, a laptop computer when they, when they
2 start. I think that's a terrible mistake.

3 EB: Why?

4 FT: Because they use it as a distraction device during class. And it creates this mindset of total
5 dependence on computers or the internet for, for learning. And I don't think that's a proper way
6 of harnessing the means at our disposal. The means harness us in that sense because you're so
7 slavishly occupied with the internet, and you're so connected all the time that you lose your
8 attention span. And it's difficult to, ah, to follow a lecture for 45 minutes if the teacher doesn't
9 have a PowerPoint, or some form of eye candy, for the, for the students.

10 EB: Entertainment.

11 FT: Yeah.

12 EB: Do you think there's a proper time to introduce computers as tools of learning?

13 FT: Oh certainly, certainly.

14 EB: When?

15 FT: When? I'd say middle school. Or perh—even elementary school. You should introduce kids
16 to the encyclopedias and maps that are available online. I mean, they're great resources there for
17 sure. I'm not a teetotaler, just saying go back to chalkboards—not at all. But there have to be
18 certain limits placed on the use. And if students are looking at smartboards the entire day, just,
19 such that the technology becomes second nature to them, you run the risk of, of losing human
20 contact with the teacher as the main dispenser of information and knowledge. You also run the
21 risk of, of not teaching the kids how to read, how to enjoy reading for, for pleasure. If they're so
22 focused on the screen and images they might be less likely to pick up a book and lose themselves
23 in their own imaginative world based on the book. I think that's real risk today, in elementary
24 education as well as high school. That wasn't really a question at all, that was me musing. That's
25 based on my experience teaching 7th and 8th grade, and, and high school seniors, and here at
26 UD. I use, I use powerpoints over at the Prep school for my lessons, and occasional videos. But I
27 insist on asking questions, the banter back and forth, it's not just a dry lecture. And even here I,
28 I'm planning to begin incorporating some PowerPoints, but I love the, the dialogue form of
29 class—it was kinda like that when you had Under the Bible. I mean, I present things, I want to
30 hear questions, I want the interactions to, to enrich your reading of whatever you're studying.

31 EB: Well, thank you Fr. Thomas.

32 FT: It's been my pleasure Ms. Emily, happy to help, happy to help.

