

Update from the Protestant Chaplain: May 17, 2020

Sunday, May 17, 2020

Easter 6A

Good Morning,

The disruption of the academic calendar is quite unsettling. Disturbances in the world related to war, famine, pestilence, differences in political agendas and ideologies, these do not bother me. I expect these disturbances, for this is just another day on the planet Earth. However, I am surprised at how much I am disturbed by the disruption of the academic calendar.

The COVID 19 crisis cleared all of our calendars. The good news is that we responded to the crisis by reshaping our habits and schedules to place a high priority on human life with a careful attention to human suffering. But what I had not anticipated was how the disruption of the academic calendar would affect me. I had not realized how central the academic calendar is to defining schools, colleges and universities as communities.

Calendars define time, but they also define community. I remember the first time I had a job that was not on an academic calendar. I was suddenly out of sync with my friends who were still in jobs on academic calendars. My January to December job seemed to be spinning at a different angle than the academic calendar of September to May with its long glorious pause of summer.

But the rock-solid anchor of the academic calendar suddenly changed in March. MARCH! March has never been confused with the beginning of the year. But this March, the calendar was reset mid semester and has yet to land anywhere recognizable. Even the seven-day hegemony of Sunday through Saturday barely exists. These disruptions have led me to think about how the academic calendar is the tie that binds the academic communities. My favorite part of the semester was often the end. The end of the semester's events include the last concert of this group or the last dance of that group or the last coffee or lunch with the graduating senior. I am really missing those moments. These are events that shape our calendars.

As our semester ends, our calendars are on pause while the faculty and the administration meet to listen and discuss the nature of next year's academic calendar. This waiting period reminds me of the calendar controversies of the early Christian church. (A brief mention of the second century controversy is mentioned in Eusebius's [Ecclesiastical History, Book Five, chapter 23.](#))

In the history of Christianity, the struggle over setting a calendar is a common theme that has reappeared many times. In the second century, as the Christianity community became more diverse and widespread, Church leaders tried to set the date of Easter. They were trying to reconcile their connection to Judaism, their connection with the original disciples who followed Jesus and they were trying to find a way of commemorating the resurrection. The question of how to define the Christian calendar was revisited several times over the centuries. Usually this discussion follows some kind of disruption or an attempt to incorporate a marginalized Christian group into a larger conglomeration (sometimes, unfortunately this incorporation comes through intimidation rather than diplomacy).

However, when a form of diplomacy is applied, differences were addressed by meetings of church leaders, often called synods or councils. Meetings were held, consensus was reached and a decision was made and a calendar was born. But not just a calendar, but the potential anchor for the formation of a community.

Today, at Williams, we are witnessing something of a miracle in the recreation of an academic calendar. The rock-solid academic calendar most of us have known since kindergarten is being re-imagined for the sake of

upholding the core values of an academic community in light of the pandemic. COVID 19 is running on its own schedule and to ignore this would bring avoidable suffering. Notice how so much of the country wants to ignore the crisis, until it comes to their own backyard. But this is a reaction by individuals who are trying to protect their own welfare. Schools and colleges do not have this luxury – these institutions must make decisions for a community, not just the needs of a network of individuals. Our academic calendars may have been disrupted, but our common goal to education and to foster scholarship have not changed. The question is, how can we fulfill our common goals without bringing harm to our communities. Ultimately, this means a new calendar that upholds the values and remains connected to the traditions of each unique academic community.

Surveys of students about the virtual semester by the [Williams Record](#) show how students are thinking about the academic calendar. In my conversations with students, I have heard two common themes: the loss of companions in the academic journey and the loss of the love of learning. The methods of online learning can mute these two aspects of scholarship. Even in the virtual world, calendars can be useful tools to foster companionship in the academic journey and the love of learning. But nothing replaces being with others who are living out events of a shared calendar, shaped by common goals and values.

My hope for all of you is that you will find ways of fostering companionship in the academic journey of college and to find ways to foster your love of learning. Do not underestimate the power of the calendar to reach these goals. The most fundamental unit in a calendar is an appointment. You have the power to make an appointment. Maybe this is why we cling to Zoom-like apps, at least we can all make an appointment with another person. However, it takes a community to make a calendar. What is a calendar but a consensus of when people meet with fellow companions on the academic journey and to hold events that foster the love of learning?

Having said this – seniors, one of the most important days on your calendar is coming up – the day that the school will recognize your achievements and declare that you are a graduate of Williams and member of the alumni society. Do not confuse this with the celebration of your graduation that will happen next year. But please, please mark June 7 on your calendar with others. Ask your families or people with whom you are sheltering-in to throw a party. Paperless Post and Party City are selling graduation swag. Purchase a banner, marked the day on your calendar, and even though we are separate, we will all be thinking of you on June 7.

Thank you for reading this letter this semester. This will be the last Weekly letter for Spring Semester 2020. I will probably do something in the summer – I will let you know what form that will take. I think I would like a forum where I can receive your comments without the survey and so that perhaps the readers can speak with each other. Please be patient as I come up to the speed with the technology! I will continue having office hours and we chaplains are available to meet with students online. We also meet with alumni all the time on the January-December calendar so be in touch!

The Rev. Valerie Bailey Fischer