Introduction:

This class is an opportunity to reflect on your preparation to balance doing well in life and doing good in the world in the areas of intimacy, work, community (public engagement) and spirituality.

The historian Dick Flacks has distinguished people who make a living from people who make history. The assumption of this class is that BC should have prepared you, and you should have prepared yourself, to be people who do both: make a living and make history (or, put differently, to do well and to do good at the same time). The job of the Capstone course is to allow you to reflect upon and integrate your experiences so that you can discern where you stand now on the dimensions of an adult life: the capacity to do well in work, intimacy, community and spirituality.

For purposes of this course, work is not defined as “career,” or “job” but as the process of having an effect in the world by whatever means (employment, civic engagement, artistic endeavor, physical prowess, etc.). Love is defined not primarily by romantic or family involvement, but by the capacity to act in a spirit of compassion, tenderness, delight and using a sense of humor and a sense of proportion. Community raises the question of who is “us” and where does “them” begin – who is included in our circle of concern and who is excluded. Spirituality refers to systems of meaning making. Such systems may be religious, or political/ideological, or they may be some personally constructed mix of interpretive strategies.

I will argue that, in order to find satisfying answers to life’s challenges, you need to know how to ask good questions. For a sociologist, good questions are those that allow you to see the intersection of biography and history, to understand how personal choices are both shaped by and shape societal forces.

Good questions, in turn are connected to good answers: ones that allow you to act productively while steering a middle course between hearsay, prejudice and formula on the one hand and exhaustive scholarly research on the other. A good answer allows you to make decisions while respecting the fact that most knowledge is incomplete, ambiguous and, often, contested.
Moreover, good answers, while individually constructed, are also shaped by the societal context in which they occur. The sociologist C. Wright Mills calls this interplay between text and context “the intersection of biography and history.” In his essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Karl Marx wrote that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; ...but under circumstances directly encountered.”

We begin this class with attention to “good questions.” You will be asked to reflect on the best question you were asked and to wrestle with the three questions offered to us by Fr. Michael Himes as he seeks to help us with the issues of vocational discernment.

Next, we will practice “thinking in context” by using the work of C. Wright Mills and Peggy McIntosh as they apply to your BC experience. This is an exercise in discerning what small and do-able changes you can make that might generate larger changes in the community around you.

To cover the topics of intimacy, work, community and spirituality we will use three case studies to ground your own reflections on your past four years and your hopes for the future. The materials will be drawn from my lectures, and from social science, fiction and film sources. We are using works of film and fiction because, after graduation, very few people read textbooks, but we do read fiction and see films that enlarge our understanding of ourselves and our communities.

The first case study will focus on Palestine as a context for building an individual life. Every aspect of existence for Palestinians is defined by the fact that Palestinians are a stateless people living under the longest continuing occupation of the 20th and 21st centuries. Individual Palestinians have vastly different responses to their oppressive circumstances: some resist non-violently, some violently; some retreat into a purely private horizon, trying to block out the difficulties of life; some help their neighbors and others exploit their neighbors. But, whatever their individual responses, those responses are deeply marked by the context in which they are constructed. We will ask what we can learn about a society that is organized around a single issue or question.

The second case study will focus on South Africa as a context for building an individual life. South Africa is a society that was once marked by a single question/issue (the struggle against Apartheid) and, having resolved that question, is now looking for an equally unifying issue to guide the future. It is a society in transition. Again, individual responses to the quest for mission vary tremendously, but all lives are marked by the question “Where do we go from here?” We will ask what we can learn about a society that is asking “What’s next?”

The third case study will focus on the United States as a context for building an individual life. While deep inequalities persist in the United States and curtail the options available to some of our fellow citizens and neighbors, America is nevertheless characterized by a vast array of choice for most people. We might think of ourselves as a
society in which nearly anything is possible but nothing is essential. How do we build a good life in the face of an often bewildering array of choices?

Course Requirements

*NO Capstone course may be taken on a pass-fail basis.*

A schedule of assignment dates is attached below. Students will be REQUIRED to attend all classes, to participate in class discussions EVERY WEEK, to write 6 essays and to lead discussions about novels and films. ABSOLUTELY NO LATE WORK WILL BE ACCEPTED FOR CREDIT UNLESS AN EXTENSION HAS BEEN GRANTED BY ME BEFORE THE DUE DATE OF THE ASSIGNMENT. Your final grade will be computed as follows:

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\begin{align*}
6 \text{ essays} @ 12\% \text{ each} &= 72\%
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
class \text{ participation} &= 28\%
\end{align*}
\]

(grading on class participation to be constructed with input from students)

Academic Integrity

Guidelines for academic integrity in written work are posted on the Boston College website at

bc.edu/bc_org/avp/enmgt/stserv/acad/univ.html#integrity

If you have any questions pertaining to academic integrity, please do not hesitate to ask me. If you are caught violating Boston College’s policies on academic integrity, you will receive a failing grade for the assignment and the appropriate Dean will be notified in accordance to the rules set forth by Boston College. Deans may prescribe a failing grade for the class or even expulsion, depending on the circumstances.

Disability Rights

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities.

Course Schedule

*Week 1 (September 2): Recognizing Good Questions*

Readings:
Fr. Michael Himes, “Fostering Vocational Discernment among Undergraduates” on-line reserves
Class exercise:
What was the best question you were ever asked and what made it so good? How would you identify the qualities of good questions?

Essay (Due September 9):
At this moment, in your senior year, how would you answer Fr. Himes’ three questions: what is your joy? What are your talents? What does the world need from you? How did your experiences at BC help you to identify joy, talent and, especially, societal need?

Weeks 2 (September 9): Asking Questions in Sociological Perspective: Thinking in Context

Readings:
C. Wright Mills, “The Promise,” (chapter 1 of The Sociological Imagination)
Peggy McIntosh “White Privilege, Male Privilege” on-line reserves.
9 Clueless things white people say when confronted with racism at:

Class Exercise #1:
What are the most significant features of your environment at BC? In the United States? How do they shape your ability to answer Fr. Himes’ questions?

Class Exercise #2:
In small groups, discuss the ways in which wealth, whiteness, heterosexuality are normalized at BC. For each example, what behaviors would help to “de-normalize” unearned privilege?

Group Essay (September 16):
How have certain race, gender, class, age and sexuality categories been normalized in your life at BC? Please be very specific. If you were to challenge this normalization, what changes would you make in your own behavior? What would you expect of other students, the administration, the faculty, alumni? How would you achieve the changes you, yourself, can make?

Weeks 3-6 (September 16 – October 6): Palestine- building a life in the shadow of occupation

Week Three (September 16): Palestine – historical background
Lecture: Eve Spangler, + film “Christmas Break in Palestine,”
Reading:


Week 4 (September 23): Palestine – ordinary people respond to difficult circumstances
Film: Paradise Now
(extra credit possibility: compare to The Crucible – is there any belief or project you would be prepared to die for?)
Discussion – to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Week 5 (September 30): Palestine – ordinary people respond to difficult circumstances
Reading: Amy Wilentz, Martyr’s Crossing New York: Ballantine Books
(extra credit possibility – compare to Saed Kashua’s Second Person Singular – how is family the window into the integration of a life?)
Discussion – to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Week 6 (October 7) – Palestine – what does it mean for us
Discussion:
How do people in Palestine combine making a living with making history? How do they manage to act effectively in the world (work)? How is love (compassion, tenderness, delight, humor, sense of proportion) expressed among them? Who is included as “us” in the community, and who are “they” (the others) and how are they viewed? What overarching systems of interpretations/meaning-making are in use (e.g. religion, political ideology, personal philosophies)? Please be sure to make use of the film and readings in answering these questions

Essay, due October 14
In Palestine, as elsewhere, people live lives in which intimacy, work, community and spirituality are entwined. In the case of Palestine, they are entwined against a background that is dominated by a single struggle: to end the occupation. Using materials from the films we saw and the books we read, show how this background dialogues with individual choices in building a life. How would your own choices about work, family, spirituality and community change if America were similarly consumed by one single struggle – be sure to ground this answer in an example of a single struggle that might be of all-consuming importance to you.

Weeks 7- 10 (October 14 – November 4): South Africa – Building a life in the midst of transformation

Week 7 (October 14): South African History
Lecture: Eve Spangler + film *City Lovers* (Nadine Gordimer)
Readings: Peter Abrahams *A Wreath for Udomo*

Week 8 (October 21): South Africa – ordinary people responding to massive social change
Film: *Tsotsie*
(Possible extra credit: *Stand and Deliver* – how do educational aspirations differ in the US and So. Africa?)
Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Week 9 (October 28): South Africa – ordinary people responding to massive social change
Reading: Zoe Wicomb *You Can’t Get Lost in Capetown*
(possible extra credit assignment: Nadine Gordimer *None to Watch Over Me* – how does the transition from Apartheid to non-racial and partially successful democracy differ for whites and blacks in South Africa?)
Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Week 10 (November 4): Discussion – what does it mean for us
How do people in South Africa combine making a living with making history? How do they manage to act effectively in the world (work)? How is love (compassion, tenderness, delight, humor, sense of proportion) expressed among them? Who is included as “us” in the community, and who are “they” (the others) and how are they viewed? What overarching systems of interpretations/meaning-making are in use (e.g. religion, political ideology, personal philosophies)?

**Essay, due November 11**
In South Africa, as elsewhere, people live lives in which intimacy, work, community and spirituality are entwined. In the case of South Africa, they are entwined against a background of a society seeking a new sense of direction and purpose. Using materials from the books we read and the films we saw, show how this background dialogues with individual choices in building a life. How would your own choices about work, family, spirituality and community change if America were similarly seeking to rededicate itself to a new vision of the future? Using the example from your Palestine paper, what would you do if the overarching issue in your life suddenly got resolved and you had to move on?

**Weeks 11-14 (November 11 – December 9): The US – building a life where “anything goes”**

Week 11 (November 11):
Lecture – Eve Spangler: Inequality in America

Week 12 (November 18):
Film: *The Wedding Banquet*
Discussion: to be lead by 2 students: framing good questions

Week 13: (December 2):
Reading: Barbara Kingsolver *Flight Behavior*
Discussion: to be lead by 2 students – framing good questions

Budget Exercise
Class exercise in constructing a family budget for yourself at age 30 (or: putting your money where your mouth is).

**Essay, due December 9**
You live in a society that combines an ethos of “anything goes” with a social structure that limits opportunity for many. How does this context shape your plans for work, intimacy, community and spirituality?

*Week 14 (December 9): Summing up – are you ready for the next steps in your life?*
Dinner at Eve’s house

**Essay, due during finals period assigned for this course**
The budget assignment
Please prepare a family budget as you imagine it for yourself at age 30. Be sure to document your source for every price you name. When you see where you are putting your money, how does this change the essay you just completed about your life plans?