

BOSTON COLLEGE

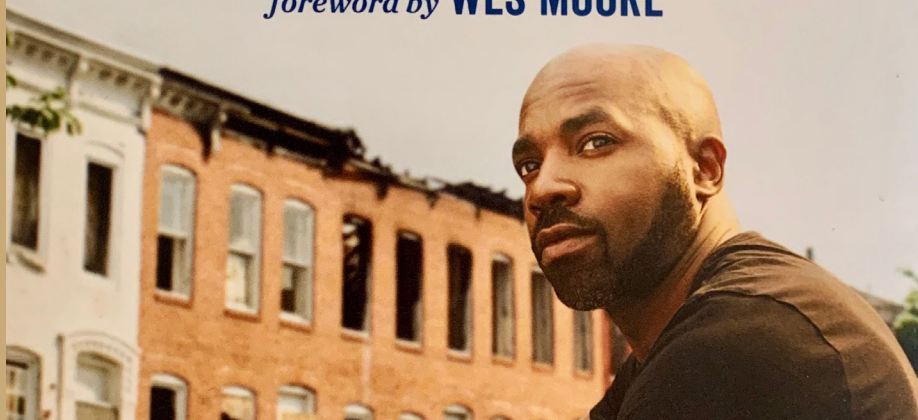
THE MASTER PLAN

My Journey from Life in Prison
to a Life of Purpose

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with Bret Witter

foreword by WES MOORE



FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION

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WHY READ A BOOK?

We can learn what is in any book on Google or Amazon, hear what others think on Twitter, listen to a TedTalk if we want to learn from cutting-edge thinkers. So why sit with a thick paper tome when it's far easier to get our information and entertainment in other forms?

One answer is precisely because it is easier, and noisier, to learn and be entertained via digital and truncated means. Technology keeps us connected, linked, always visible, always able to see and be seen. Sometimes this connection, this being linked, on, and seen is valuable, worthwhile and even politically efficacious. Sometimes.

But if all we ever do is check status updates, skim articles, and read summaries of other peoples' ideas while listening to music and texting our friends, something valuable gets lost. That something goes by many names: concentration, solitude, space for reflection, intimacy, and authenticity. Reading a book, we hope you'll learn at Boston College if you don't already know and believe, brings with it unique form of pleasure and thinking.

Reading can take us out of the smallness of our own perception, our own little lives, the limited boundaries of what we have experienced. We can glimpse into the perspectives and even empathize with people whose lives are vastly different than our own. As Zits, the narrator of Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight* learns, "I can't jump into Dave's body but I can feel and see and understand a little bit about his pain, I guess.[1]"

Beyond teaching empathy, reading takes us briefly out of the noisy, overwhelming chaos that is our daily life and gives us something else, which William Deresiewicz describes well:

"But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of *his* solitude, *his* attempt to think for himself.

¹ Alexie, S. (2007). *Flight*: a novel. New York: Black Cat.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they're not *from* today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don't reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought." [2]

Cultivating habits of thought. That's what coming to BC is offering you. Some habits can and should be digital, connected, and even multi-tasked. But sometimes we all need the habit of opening a good book, diving in, and leaving the din of our contemporary moment, temporarily, behind.



WHY READ *THE MASTER PLAN*?

As a member of the class of 2023, each of you will have the opportunity to read *The Master Plan* and to welcome its author, Chris Wilson, to Boston College to discuss this work.

In the book, Wilson uses Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" to illustrate his own story, comparing his neighborhood to the people in the cave who focus solely on the shadows, unaware of the world outside the cave. Wilson shares his story of growing up in a "rough" neighborhood in Washington, DC, where gang activity and violence created an insular environment. As he writes in Part 1, "There was another world outside, bigger and more beautiful than those poor chained people could imagine. They just weren't allowed to go there" (p. 14). That violence shaped his journey after he killed a man in self-defense and was sentenced to life without parole. *The Master Plan* details Wilson's relationships – growing up, in prison, and as a returned citizen – and the goals he set for himself to escape the chains of the cave.

² From a lecture by William Dereseiwicz to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, October 2009

As you read *The Master Plan* it is the hope of the University that it gives you insight into how to respond to life's questions and seek direction as you move through your own personal journey and encourages you to cultivate those habits of thought in the same way that Wilson describes his cultivation of habit in the book. Since 2004, *Conversations in the First Year* has engaged members of the incoming class in an intellectual and reflective dialogue with a common text, embodying the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition at Boston College which calls us to examine our faith and experience in conversation with other thinkers in order to pursue the greater glory of God. This conversation will begin for you with this common text and will carry over to conversations with all members of the Boston College community during your next four years.

This ongoing conversation is part of the University's commitment to finding God in all things. "Contemporary Jesuit schools maintain the original commitment to rigorous intellectual development, to personal, moral, and religious formation, and to the discernment of God's action in all aspects of the student's experience. The pursuit of the greater glory of God remains rooted in a worldview that God can be encountered in all creation and through all human activity, especially in the search for truth in every discipline, in the desire to learn, and in the call to live justly together" (From *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Conversation at Boston College*).



A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic University, we will ask each of you to engage in conversation, to live together, and to share your life with one another. As members of the Class of 2023, your conversation will include this book which invites you to consider how you will live a life of purpose and meaning.

The early Jesuits struggled to describe what they called “our way of proceeding.” Their distinctive spirituality can be seen as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on its meaning, and ends in deciding how to act. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements: being attentive, being reflective, and being loving. It results in the kind of good decision-making that St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, called discernment. Discernment enables each of us to seek the greater good before us. Having this deep interior knowledge of the heart is to communicate with God and trust that the hand of God is at work fortifying and directing us in our lives. One of the many goals of a Jesuit education is to produce men and women for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong process of exploring our experience, reflecting upon its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action that creates a harmonious community for us all. We can also think of this process as something that we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives, for example, during the four years of college or when we have to make important decisions. When we discern, we want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to do.

Through the practice of discerning, we grow in our ability to imagine how we are going to live our lives and discover our vocations. The novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner describes vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” When we arrive at this place of convergence, we understand the fit between who we are and what the world needs of us; St. Ignatius urges us to be unafraid to live with the consequences of this realization and to respond with generosity and

magnanimity, because this is the way that we can love as God loves (From A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

From the very beginning, the goal of Jesuit education has been to form men and women for others. To cultivate this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions translated their distinctive spirituality into an educational vision by describing it as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on the meaning of experience, and ends in deciding how to act moving forward. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements: Be attentive, be reflective, be loving.

Being attentive is largely about us and how God is working in us through our experience. Being reflective moves our gaze outward, measuring our experience against the accumulated wisdom of the world. Being loving requires that we look even more closely at the world around us. It asks the question: How are we going to act in this world? In part, this is a question about what we are going to do with the knowledge and self-understanding and freedom that we have appropriated by reflection. How shall we act in ways that are consistent with this new self and what it knows and values?

But we can't move very far in the direction of answering this question without discovering that it is not only a question about how our lives can be authentic. It is also a question about our relationship to the world around us and what the world needs us to do. We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships with others, grow up in cultural, social, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take responsibility for them, to contribute to nurturing and improving them, to give something back

*So, for Jesuit education, it is not enough to live authentically in the world. We have to participate in the transformation of the world (the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam* conveys the same idea, of mending or repairing the world). For more than four hundred years, it has been said that Jesuit education educated "the whole person." Today, we live with an increasingly global sense of what it means to be human. A person can't be considered "whole" without an educated solidarity with other human beings in their hopes and fears and especially in their needs. We can't pay attention to our experience and reflect on it without realizing how our own lives are*

connected with the dreams of all those with whom we share the journey of human existence, and therefore with the economic, political, and social realities that support or frustrate their dreams. This is why Jesuit education is so often said to produce "men and women for others" (From A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

As part of this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions established guiding principles to cultivate a reflective practice among their students. These same reflective principles provide the framework for today's Boston College experience.

In his homily at last year's Mass of Gratitude, University President William P. Leahy, S.J. spoke about the value of this practice: "This process of pausing to reflect about who and what we are grateful for, I think encourages a deeper appreciation in how we have been blessed by our friends, family, relationships, experiences, and opportunities." He added, "We know well that for flowers and any plant to grow and flourish it obviously needs to be put in soil, it needs to be watered, it needs to be fertilized – and then it blossoms. We, in our own way, are to bear fruit that lasts, that has impact, that fosters peace and reconciliation and hope in our day" (Mass of Gratitude, May 6, 2018).

As you read *The Master Plan*, consider how the author and those he encounters bear fruit that lasts – and how you are called to foster peace, reconciliation, and hope.

As Wilson prepares to be released from prison, he reflects on the relationships he formed at Patuxent: "The people who truly cared about me, who taught me and encouraged me and loved me like a brother, were my friends inside. I wouldn't be who I am today without them, especially Steve and Tooky. We are there heroes of our own story. It was being there for one another – not for a job, not for money, not for credit – that changed our lives. I had always wanted a family. Well, I found one" (p. 250). *As you enter Boston College, to whom do you feel connected? Your family? Your friends? How will these connections change over the course of the next four years? Who are the heroes in your story?*

Wilson juxtaposes feelings of hope and hopelessness as he talks about his time in prison. He describes feeling inspired by Mr. Edwards' faith when he recalls his talk at the University of Baltimore

Law Building, “I believed God had a purpose for me, and that gave me hope. I had been denied five times, but I believed, and the impossible happened. I believe today, I said, that He has a purpose for every one of you” (p.331). *How do the people in your life help you sustain your hope? How will your hopes help orient your life to building God’s kingdom? How do you hope to pursue the good in your life at Boston College?*

Wilson also expresses how the prison system is designed to set inmates up for failure while in prison and once they return from prison: “Once you’re in the system, you’re not longer a human being to them...You gave up your humanity when they stripped you naked at the door. You were a number now, and the only important rule was this: numbers stay inside” (p. 237). He goes on to write, “Our system is not set up for men and women released from prison to succeed. It’s actually set up for them to fail” (p. 245). *What systemic and personal injustices have you witnessed in our world? What power do you have to right those injustices?*

And yet, while the system is set up for failure, Wilson was challenged by his friend, Steve, to rise above that, to focus on the present rather than the future: “Look around. Think of all the good you could be doing for people in here” (p. 132). *Who are the people who have been conversation partners with you along your journey? How have the conversation partners in your life challenged you to recognize the good within yourself and within others? Who are the conversation partners you will seek out during your time at Boston College to help you consider your relationship with God, your relationship with others and the world around you, and your relationship with yourself?*

At the end of the book, Wilson comments that as his world has broadened he has seen injustices and need in many other places. “It’s not just Baltimore,” he writes, “That’s what I have come to realize. The things we need are needed all over the world” (p. 389). *What are the needs that you see if the world around you? How will you respond to those needs? How does one listen to and discern their vocational calling?*

George Williams, S.J., a Boston College graduate and a Jesuit priest who serves as Chaplain at San Quentin State Prison, recently wrote about California’s decision to abolish the death penalty, “Everything about the death penalty system seemed to be designed to

deny hope” (America Magazine, March 19, 2019). He added, “I have never had the impression that the men on death row feared executions. What they (and most prisoners) fear the most is dying sick and old, all alone in a dark cell, forgotten by all who mattered to them. This is why I believe life without the possibility of parole is even crueler than the death penalty” (America Magazine, March 19, 2019). *As you begin your time at Boston College, how will you decide what you want to do? How will you persevere when faced with your own personal darkness?*

At the end of the book, Wilson writes, “In my experience, being successful requires a team of supporters, or better yet, people who believe in you” (p. 403). *Who do you count on as your supporters? Who are the people who believe in you? Who do you believe in?*

Wilson continually poses the question – to other inmates, to his audiences, to himself – What’s Your Endgame? “What does success look like? Let’s define it. What, specifically, do we want to achieve? What do we want our legacy to be? What kind of world do we want to leave behind us? Now...What’s our Master Plan to get there?” (p.360). *As you begin your career at Boston College, how do you answer these questions? What is your endgame? What is your Master Plan to get there?*



THE EXAMEN

The goal of Jesuit education is to produce men and women for whom discernment is a habit.

We can think of discernment as the lifelong project of exploring our experience, naming its meaning, and living in a way that translates this meaning into action. We can also think of this process as something we focus on with special intensity at particular moments in our lives -- during the four years of college, for example, or when we have to make important decisions and want to do so freely and with a sense of what God is calling us to. At these times, we might be especially conscious of using spiritual exercises to help us negotiate the process. But we can also think of these three movements as the intertwined dynamics of daily life, the moment-by-moment activity of becoming fully human (From A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

In *The Master Plan*, one way that Wilson integrates action and contemplation is in regularly reviewing his progress on his master plan and continuing to evaluate the steps to his endgame. The Ignatian tradition encourages this same reflective practice of reviewing one's day as part of cultivating a habit of discernment in a mode of prayer called the Examen. This is a prayer in five parts which helps individuals move through an examination of conscience, allowing the experiences of the day to guide one's reflection. Its basis is in Christianity, but it can also be considered in light of other faith traditions.

At first it might be helpful to move through all five of the points, spending two or three minutes on each, just to see what works for you. Or you may want to remain on the first point, giving thanks, after an especially great day. Or there may be times when you want to consider your career or a possible long-term relationship and then you might spend time on orienting your future. There is no single way to make the examination. The only essential is to bring your day before God. At the core of the examination is self-awareness before God. Its power lies in the way you become conscious of your own relationship with God, with your own spirituality.

Giving Thanks. *I thank God for the way God has met me today—in the work I have done, in the people I have encountered, in the letters from home, etc. I begin my prayer with the solid hope that God cares for me, knows me and loves me with an everlasting love.*

Seeking Light. *I ask for light to understand the specific moments in which God has clarified who I am, what my gifts really are, and how I treat other people. I ask not to hide from the truth. I ask to be gentle with myself and honest, too. I ask to learn from God who I am.*

Reviewing Life. *I go over the events of the day, noticing the ones where I felt closer to God and the ones where I felt distanced from God. Where today I met weakness or failure, I ask for forgiveness and self-acceptance. Where today I have lived faithfully and productively, I rejoice in God's service. God does not ask the impossible from me, only the good that I can do and be.*

Noting Patterns. *I stand before my history as God does—lovingly wise about who I am, eager to make me part of the work of the Kingdom, allowing me to understand the patterns of my life that lead me to a more personal sense of how God calls me here at Boston College. Are there emerging insights about*

the life I should live? Are there difficulties that I keep trying to avoid and know I must face? Are there people, places and occasions that especially open me to God? And are there people, places, and occasions that bring out the worst in me? What does God want me to do with the person that I am becoming?

Orienting My Future. *Finally, I ask to live as Christ did. I look at the pattern of openness and the essentials of his teaching. I look at the trust he had in God's design for the world. I look at his availability to people. I accept the strategy of forgiveness, truthfulness and service that Christ portrayed. I want to believe that I am called to live just as Christ was, as a woman or man for others. Of course, I will fail. But failure can be the way to wisdom and compassion if I use failure to know myself better and to understand the human heart more deeply. More important, I look ahead out of the successes of the day. I ask to live with a growing sense of God's trust in my future, (The Red Book 2009, pp 115, 117).*

The reflective practice of the Examen is one that Rev. Anthony Penna, Boston College's Associate Vice President for Mission and Ministry and Director of Campus Ministry, prayed that a recent graduating class would take with them from Boston College into the world.

Just before Commencement he offered these words to them:

“St. Ignatius said that the world's great sin is the lack of gratitude. So, I'm going to ask you to consider integrating this simple ritual into your daily life when you move on from Boston College. Every night before you go to bed, take a few minutes to think about your day. Examine the day reflectively, the ups and the downs (for no day is without a few bumps in the road, as is true for a four-year college career). Then, identify one thing that occurred, one thing that happened in the day for which you are grateful and give thanks for that one thing. Let that be the way you end every day before you fall to sleep. If you do this, you'll be a healthier, happier, more spiritual, and more balanced person. This practice will be good for you and everyone else who's a part of your life as well” (Boston College Class of 2015 Senior Class Toast, May 14, 2015).

We renew his prayer for the Class of 2023 as you begin your time here at Boston College.



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

As you enter Boston College, you must consider how we live in the 21st century and how the world is growing rapidly and changing in unforeseen ways. In the midst of this globalized and technologically driven world, we ask you to critically evaluate all that has come before us. To enter into the University core curriculum is to enter into a foundation of knowledge and experiences that will better equip each of you to synthesize and adapt to the ever-changing world that you are part of each day. Being able to read, write, and think critically will be important building blocks within your academic journey here at Boston College.

To fully embrace your Jesuit, Catholic education, you also need to consider how you will grow in your own understanding of faith. There are many conversation partners, including the Jesuit community, faculty, staff, and administrators, who are here to be your companions in contemplative action and reflective conversation as you search for truths in your life and the world around you.

PATIENT TRUST

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.
And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.



CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIRST YEAR:
A PROGRAM OF THE OFFICE OF FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE



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